

‘Queen’s Gambit’ actor Moses Ingram’s unrelenting journey from West Baltimore to Hollywood

The Yale-trained actor, 27, pursued her dream with the support of family and a committed student adviser: ‘I will run and I will not stop running’



Moses Ingram, who plays the role of Jolene on Netflix’s “The Queen’s Gambit,” in North Hollywood, Calif., in January. (Emily Berl for The Washington Post)

By **Keith L. Alexander**
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In 2012, Moses Ingram, then a freshman at Baltimore City Community College, sat down with a student adviser and shared her goal. She wanted to be an actor.

The adviser picked out a thick book of professions, plunked it in front of her and told her to “pick something,” Ingram said.

As she stormed away, Ingram considered dropping out. But before she left the building, she walked into another adviser’s office. Ingram steeled herself for another brush off. But Nana Gyesie had a different message: He was there to nurture.

“He never minimized my dreams. He dreamed *with* me. About everything my dreams could be. And then he brought it down to layman’s terms and was like, ‘Let’s come up with a plan to get you where you want to be.’ And that’s what we did,” Ingram said.

That fall day exemplified the ups and downs of a journey that took Ingram from her West Baltimore neighborhood to the role of Jolene, the best friend to the lead character in the Netflix miniseries “The Queen’s Gambit.” The show is up for a Golden Globe Award on Sunday.

Ingram, now 27, said the acting bug began when her mother, along with a teacher at Windsor Hills Elementary, enrolled her in an after-school theater program as a way to keep her out of trouble as a high-energy 10-year-old.

She never lost interest. After high school there were years of part-time jobs, countless auditions, rejections and local theater gigs in Baltimore and Washington. Ingram eventually made it into the master’s drama program at Yale.

Success in “The Queen’s Gambit” quickly led to other roles. She landed a part in the Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand film “The Tragedy of Macbeth,” slated to be released this fall. And she is working on the Michael Bay-directed thriller “Ambulance” with Jake Gyllenhaal and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II.

“I feel really blessed,” Ingram said in one of her first extensive interviews about her life and work since “The Queen’s Gambit” debuted in October and went on to become one of Netflix’s highest-rated programs of all time.

[‘The Queen’s Gambit,’ a period drama that erases sexism from 1960, is the best fantasy show of the year]

“Sometimes when you don’t see things, you don’t know, you are kind of like, feeling around in the dark, looking for a light switch, hoping for something that works,” she said. “I think about all of the days I worked hard, up at 4 a.m. on buses, standing out in the cold waiting for a train with my mom, trying to get to an audition. I feel really blessed to be bearing some fruit from it now.”

She ‘stopped the room’

Gyesie, (pronounced Jeh-see) remembers the day a younger Ingram walked into his office carrying a large bookbag.

“He asked me about myself,” Ingram recalled. “He asked what I wanted to do and who I wanted to be.

Baltimore City Community College didn’t have a drama program, and Gyesie knew little about the acting profession. But that meeting, Ingram said, was the start of a relationship that helped push her toward realizing her dreams.

Gyesie encouraged Ingram to audition for local plays but to also keep her grades up so that, after graduation, she could earn a scholarship to a four-year college that had a drama curriculum.

“I saw she was really committed to her passion. So it was about nurturing her talent and providing the avenue for what she wanted to do,” he said.

After 17 years working with students at the college, Gyesie, 47, now serves as director of the school’s Student Success Center. He recalled when Ingram participated in a school talent program for first-year students. Some read poems. Others played instruments or sang. Ingram performed a monologue and received a standing ovation.

“She just pretty much stopped the room and had everybody watch,” Gyesie said. “From that day forward, everyone in that audience knew she had a special talent to go beyond just saying this was something she wanted to do.”

Gyesie said Ingram worked to make her own opportunities. Along with a handful of other students, he said, she launched a spoken word and theater club, where students performed. “Mo often said, ‘Ok, I did this. Now I want to be able to do more,’” he said.

Ingram grew up in the heart of West Baltimore, about 10 minutes from where the 2015 unrest occurred following the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old man who died in police custody.

Her mother worked in child care and her stepfather worked in operations for the city of Baltimore. Together they raised a blended family of six children. The after-school arts program her family enrolled Ingram in as a child set her on a path to the Baltimore School for the Arts, which merges rigorous academics and performing arts.

She was around 16 years old when she decided to pursue acting as a career. It was then when she saw local performances of “A Raisin in the Sun” and “Hurt Village.” Ingram said she was inspired by seeing characters that looked and sounded like her, written by playwrights whose writing reminded her of Shakespeare. She said they made “the hood beautiful.”

By the time she was preparing to graduate high school, Ingram wanted to move on to theater programs at a four-year institution, like many of her classmates had done.

She was accepted into Howard University. But the financial assistance she was offered wasn’t enough to allow her to attend. “I *really* wanted to be a Bison,” she said, referring to the D.C. university’s mascot.

Baltimore City provided her a more economical opportunity. About 90 percent of the students receive financial assistance, according to the school’s latest data. The school was established in the 1940s as an extension for local high school students and allows students to pay for classes individually. “My family came together and we were able to pay for two classes at first. I couldn’t afford to take more than two classes,” Ingram said.

While at Baltimore City, Ingram had various jobs, sometimes several at once. She worked at the coat check at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, at a neighborhood Boys and Girls Club, at a movie theater and processing packages for Amazon. “It was a hectic time. I am amazed by the love and the blind faith from my family to be like, ‘Okay then, girl. All right. If that’s what you see, let’s make it happen,’” she said.

Gyesie also helped Ingram find money for school through various scholarships. In between classes and work, Ingram also worked on her craft. She twice auditioned for the Juilliard School in New York but was never accepted. She would go into Gyesie’s office, often feeling dejected. But Gyesie kept encouraging her.

“I remember Nana being like, ‘Go try it. You got time. Just put yourself out there and just go try it,’ so I did.”

On to Yale

After graduation, Ingram auditioned for plays in Baltimore, Washington and other cities. She reached out to friends who were theater majors and asked what books they used in class. Then she ordered them from Amazon and read about directing, staging, character development and how to study speech pattern to capture a character’s style of speaking and delivery, which Ingram says “lends to the authenticity of the character.”

In 2015, the National Society of Arts and Letters was holding competitions for young performing artists across the country, including in Washington. Gyesie encouraged Ingram to sign up for a chance to join other regional winners in a national competition in St. Louis.

Ingram performed a monologue from one of her previous plays, won first place in an acting category and was off to St. Louis.

At the competition she met another young actor, Jonathan Majors. Before Majors found fame in “The Last Black Man in San Francisco,”

“Lovecraft Country” and Spike Lee’s “Da 5 Bloods,” he was a graduate student at the Yale School of Drama.

Ingram, noticing his Yale baseball cap, told Majors she’d always wanted to attend the Ivy League school. He encouraged her to apply. Then he saw her perform.

“When I saw her, I said, ‘She’s got it.’ She has that independent vibration you need to survive as an artist. She was actually tough. Not a hard woman or a strong Black woman, she was just tough. Period. I could see that in her work. Because if you have that, you will make it,” Majors said.

Majors was named winner of the St. Louis competition. Ingram came in fourth. But she won his adoration.

“She has a big engine,” he said. “When you watch her, she has this sense of regality and a sense of being untamed. Artists and actresses like her really change the DNA of everything of which they are a part.”

In 2016, Ingram auditioned for Yale’s graduate program. With only an associate degree from Baltimore City, she was accepted that fall and awarded various theater scholarships.

“I was just tired then,” she said. “I was like, ‘God, if you just give me the baton one time, I will run and I will not stop running.’ Once I was there, it was off to the races.”

By her final year at Yale, in April 2019, she was receiving rave reviews for her lead performance as Viola in an Afrocentric version of Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night.”

‘A Baltimore City girl’

In June 2019, just a month after Yale’s commencement, Ingram sought a role in “The Queen’s Gambit.” After a three-minute audition in New York City, she got the part of Jolene. That August she moved to Los Angeles and began filming.

Anya Taylor-Joy, who earned a Golden Globe nomination for best actress for “The Queen’s Gambit,” said Ingram brought an unparalleled maturity to the character Jolene.

“I was incredibly impressed with this being her first job out of university, but I think that also gives her something,” Taylor-Joy said. “Moses is a real person. I was thinking about myself when I first started working. I was just a kid and Moses is a woman, truly, and I think that gives her a confidence and a gravitas that you can feel on screen. I just adore watching her.”

The women played best friends who met as children in an orphanage. “We never had to discuss the way that Beth and Jolene felt about each other. It naturally just came through the characters but came through our bond as well,” she said.

Before Ingram is even seen on screen in the first episode, viewers hear the quick, wisecracking Jolene. An employee at the orphanage warns Jolene that her foul mouth will get her into trouble. She responds with a two-word expletive. Fast forward years later in the series, and Jolene returns as an Afro-wearing, Black militant working on obtaining her law license.

[‘The Queen’s Gambit’ is mesmerizing, but there’s one glaring problem]

Full of pride, Gyesie saw much of Ingram in Jolene. “Mo is a Yale-trained actress. She’s also a Baltimore City girl and she’s going to let you know,” he said.

Ingram said she saw Jolene’s character “as a full woman with a life and heart who grew up in a place where she was at the bottom of the totem pole and grew up and wanted to change that.”

She is now looking forward to more leading roles for Black actors.

“Jolene is a supporting character,” Ingram said. “It’s complicated, because we do need more stories where people who look like me aren’t just supporting. But this was not that story. I just hope that we continue to lean into writing more stories for people that look like me.”



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