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HELLO, GORGEOUS. ANGELA BASSETT, VIOLA DAVIS, LORETTA DEVINE AND JENNIFER HUDSON: YOU'RE THE BEST OF WHAT IS AND WHAT'S TO COME ONSTAGE AND ON-SCREEN. WE CELEBRATE YOU WITH OUR ANNUAL AWARDS

Black Women in Hollywood

2011

Photography By Derek Blanks



EVEN WITHOUT THE
GLAM AND GLITZ
OF HOLLYWOOD,
ANGELA BASSETT
WOULD FIND HER
WAY TO A STAGE.
HER PASSION FOR
ACTING RUNS THAT
DEEP. BUT THE
TRUE SOURCE OF
HER HAPPINESS
LIES IN HER FAITH
AND FAMILY.
BELIEVE IT

Unstoppable

BY DENENE MILLNER

Angela Bassett was
photographed by
Derek Blanks exclu-
sively for ESSENCE,
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New York City.

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he gets it from her mama, and her grandmama and her aunts too. Betty and Brownie and Golden and Lorraine, they are her personal angels—the women who lifted her and demanded from her and loved her and breathed this insatiable desire to have it all just so. A lust for graciousness. A reverence for the Lord. A squaring of the shoulders—a nose held way high. And a willingness to pull from her arsenal the word *no*. These are what the angels taught her. These are the makings of her sound education, her enviable marriage and family, her sincere relationship with God. And, most certainly, her pitch-perfect career as one of the most celebrated and respected actresses of our generation.

For sure, Angela Bassett strives for perfection. For herself. For us. Especially when the camera is trained in her direction, when she is called to the red carpet to rep us colored girls. And if that representation falls below what Bassett would deem dignified? Well, Ms. Angela has nary a problem trading superstardom for a real regular life doing real regular woman's work.

Like, seriously.

"I can go work in a bank. I can be an anchorwoman," she muses recently during a lunch and spa date with ESSENCE at a swank Pasadena, California, hotel. She ponders that, taking in the weight of the statement. "Well, I may not be fulfilled artistically."

And then she has a lightbulb moment. "I could work at the community theater," she grins. "Yes, I could act anywhere—at church or the local Y. But what I won't do is degrade myself just for the sake of working. Institutionalized slavery is over, but images that degrade, they live on forever."

Right, right—we get that. But, um, community theater? Angela Bassett? Trudging through a \$7 performance against a Crayola-colored backdrop on some teeny stage in the basement of a musty church in the middle of nowhere?

"Oh, I'm a theater animal!" she insists. She lets out one of those rich, glossy girly laughs. "You haven't seen me onstage? If you saw me onstage, it would be transformative."

The Power to Change

Transformative. If ever there was a word that describes with laser-sharp accuracy Angela Bassett's gift—the extraordinary talent that pulses through every word, look and movement she delivers on-screen—*transformative* would be it. This much was evident when she served up her impassioned, unflinchingly honest Academy Award-nominated portrayal of Tina Turner in the biopic

What's Love Got to Do With It and certainly in the quiet dignity she infused in her role as Betty Shabazz in Spike Lee's seminal *Malcolm X*. It's a particular set of skills she fell in love with as a high school student watching James Earl Jones in the play *Of Mice and Men*. She later honed them in the classrooms of the Yale School of Drama, where she earned a graduate degree, and fine-tuned while toiling on theater stages and in small TV and film roles, including the cult classic *F/X*. But she forever cemented herself on our cinematic psyche as the fiery singer in *What's Love*—a role which led to her becoming the second African-American woman to win a Golden Globe. She's since staked her claim as the go-to actress for portrayals of some of the most celebrated Black women of our time—both real-life pioneers and fictional heroines—stacking her awards shelf with countless statuettes from every organization from the NAACP to The Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films.

Bassett, 52, returns this spring and summer to theaters as celebrated African-American scientist Dr. Amanda Waller, in the DC Comic turned big-screen flick *Green Lantern*, and as the mother of a well-to-do bride who's marrying down—way down—in the T.D. Jakes and Tracey Edmonds-produced *Jumping the Broom*. She's also signed on to play the first female police commissioner in *One Police Plaza*, a cop drama being developed by ABC Studios, and has been in talks to star opposite Idris Elba in a Broadway revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She acknowledges the aura of her work, but says she never planned it that way. "I would say



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it's more instinctual than deliberate," she reflects. "But when I look at a role, I will deliberately find the joy, the sensitivity, the strength, the vulnerability, the resilience. Because that's what I appreciate about women and Black women, in particular. That's what I want to celebrate—our resilience and our strength. And that's what I want to encourage. And that's who raised me."

And everyone, from her peers and coworkers to her fans, responds in kind. The mere mention of working with her seems to reduce even the professionals to gushing. "A dream come true," offers actress Paula Patton when asked to describe what it was like playing Bassett's daughter in *Jumping the Broom*. "I go home every day from work and I honestly can't believe I'm working with her," says Patton. "I was intimidated in the beginning—I'm not going to lie. But she was so generous an actor that she broke down all those walls."

Still, no matter how far those walls tumble, Bassett takes great pains to protect those for whom she fiercely advocates in every role. And her fans? They appreciate it, for sure. "What do they express to me, from time to time? They say that I won't embarrass them," Bassett says thoughtfully. "I think they believe I'm going to kick butt for Black women too. Even if it's giving a look."

And with that, she puts down her fork, leans back into the café's plush wall bench and folds her lithe, perfectly toned body into the classic Black mama/death glare/side-eye. That look. In an instant, it becomes so very clear: Angela Bassett may be a superstar, but, Lord, she's a Black woman's daughter and most definitely, somebody's mama.

The Role of a Lifetime

She's facing perhaps her best act yet: mothering her 5-year-old twins, Bronwyn and Slater. The mere mention of it brings a 1,000-watt smile to her lips and coaxes a syrupy, "I love mommyhood! That, indeed, is going to be my greatest work. That's the most important work."

Truth is, she's kind of a sap when it comes to her son and daughter. She tends to play "good" cop way more than bad to the point, she says, where her husband, actor Courtney B. Vance, constantly warns not to let the twins "take advantage" of her more lenient instincts. Still, though Slater, a rambunctious, adventurous boy,



Bassett's husband, Courtney B. Vance, is hands on with their kids, Bronwyn (front) and Slater.

and Bronwyn, a cautious, thoughtful girl, are far from spoiled. The couple keep their children's eyes focused on things that truly matter, and each night ends with the family reading a book and Bible verses, and offering a heartfelt prayer.

"Early on, Slater would say, 'I'm thankful for Bronwyn's chips and my toys and my train,' and Bronwyn would be thankful for Mom and Dad and Slater," Bassett coos. "And now they'll say, 'I'm thankful for God and Jesus and Mom and Dad,' and they'll pray. Even at 5, they accept a God they cannot visually see.

"I'm a believing person," she says. "You can say religious, spiritual, whatever. I believe that there's something greater than myself and it is God. And what I can do I can do, and what I can't do, God will empower me to do. He has. So every opportunity, I'm grateful for. I try to bring my best to it."

But here's the intriguing part about Bassett's best: Even after the many transformations she's made, even after all the smart roles she's played and all the accolades and the respect she's garnered for her gift, Bassett insists she can do more.

"It's a belief system," she says simply. "It's what you believe about yourself. I believe that I'm talented. I believe that I have something to give. I believe that the best is yet to come. I've done good work, but I still think there's great work ahead." □

Denene Millner contributes frequently to ESSENCE.

(SIMPLY THE BEST)



What's Love Got to Do With It (1993) Bassett won a Golden Globe for her role.



Strange Days (1995) For this sci-fi film, she won a Saturn Award for Best Actress.



Waiting to Exhale (1995) "This movie opened the door for *Sex and the City*."



Jumping the Broom (2011) "I see the strength and warmth in playing mothers."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: LONDON ENTERTAINMENT/SPLASH NEWS; 2010 SCREEN GEMS; 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORP./COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION (2); TOUCHSTONE PICTURES/COURTESY OF NEAL PETERS COLLECTION.