

# BLACK WOMEN IN HOLLYWOOD 2009

**POWER** | *Sexy. Controversial. Beautiful. Unapologetic. Oscar winner. And now her most important role—mother* By Lola Ogunnaike

## HALLE BERRY

**Halle Berry has just emerged in yet another spectacular gown—** a lavender Badgley Mischka made of beaded lace. Gasps abound as she serves up perfect pose after perfect pose at an afternoon photo shoot in downtown Manhattan. A wink and a sultry nod of the head prompts one watcher to exclaim, “Yes, Halle. Beautiful! Oh, yes.” Off in the wings, totally unaware of the frenzy her mother is causing, is Berry’s 9-month-old daughter, Nahla. She’s clutching a sippy cup and giggling as her daddy, 33-year-old model and restaurateur Gabriel Aubry, gently nuzzles her cheek. *Adorable* doesn’t even begin to describe the child who has her mother’s light mocha coloring and her father’s piercing eyes.

After the shoot, Berry changes into jeans and sweater for the interview, scoops up her bundle of joy, and asks, “Do you mind if my daughter sits with us?” It’s clear that the role she cherishes the most now is momma. “A film has to be real special for me to leave the house,” she says. “I have to love it. I mean really, really love it.”

Over the course of her 20-year career—yes, it’s been that long—she’s been a Bond girl, a blonde superhero, a lovestruck advertising executive and a crazed psychiatrist. She has played mothers and femme fatales, crackheads and sweethearts. Bared it all (twice) and her soul (countless times). Her portrayal of Dorothy Dandridge won her both a Golden Globe and an Emmy. And long before Barack Obama, she was a first—the first African-American to win an Academy Award for Best Actress.

“I wouldn’t compare winning an Oscar to being the first Black President at all,” says Berry, a staunch Obama supporter, “but it did mean for a lot of people that all things are possible.” Many would

argue that Berry has managed to pull off the impossible. At 42, the actress still commands A-list money: \$10 million per film (unless she stars in an indie project). She lands roles that were originally written for White actresses, and unlike many of her peers, she hasn’t had to return to the small screen for work. How does she explain her longevity? “I just don’t want to go away,” she says. “I haven’t let the disappointments, missteps or failures harden me or jade me. Setbacks reenergize me. They make me realize that I have more work to do.”

**“You find out who your real friends are.”**

Over the years Berry’s work has been both acclaimed and mercilessly savaged. And it’s not only the critics who have weighed in on the actress’s choices. After Berry won her Oscar for *Monster’s Ball*, Angela Bassett famously told *Newsweek* magazine that she had been offered the lead in the movie first, but turned it down because “I wasn’t going to be a prostitute on film.” Berry admits she was hurt by the backlash. “I would have rather had them call me up at home and say, ‘Halle, what the f--- was that,’ as opposed to them airing it publicly,” she says, her voice rising. “That was such an important moment for me and to have people attempt to dampen it not only for me, but for all the people who found hope and joy in that moment...” She pauses. “You find out who your real friends are. Take mental notes and keep it moving.”

Her rise to the top was far from meteoric. Born and raised in Cleveland, the daughter of a White nurse and a Black hospital attendant, Berry got her start in beauty pageants. In her first acting gig she played a model on the 1980’s sitcom *Living Dolls*. “I was >

STYLING, AGNES CAMMOCK; HAIR, RENATO CAMPORA/THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP, FIONA STILES/THE WALL GROUP; MANICURIST, ELLE FOR BARIELLE; PROP STYLIST, PATRICK ANDERSON/ART DEPARTMENT.



Halle Berry was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE by Mark Liddell, January 5, 2009, in New York City.

Halle wears a Versace dress and Annette Ferdinandsen earrings.

very much the token Black girl on that show," she says. "I'd walk into the room and say, 'Hi, y'all.' Come back in and say, 'Let's go out.' And that was the extent of my story line." She grappled with the industry's racism and its efforts to marginalize her: She's heard the phrase "We're going to go in another direction" more times than she cares to remember. "When they say that it means they don't want to go Black. At least that's what it's always meant for me," she says. One director told her that she couldn't play a park ranger because there are no Black park rangers. "That's just so ignorant," she says, still perturbed. Yet she believes there are many more opportunities for Black actors today. "Things have absolutely gotten better," she says. "Young Black artists have no idea how hard it used to be."

In an industry that considers 35 over the hill, Halle Berry is truly an anomaly. It helps that she looks a decade younger than her actual age. For the record, she is even more luminous in real life, and don't waste your time looking for a wrinkle—

there are none. But even someone as otherworldly as Berry has to worry about aging in Tinseltown. All sex symbols have an expiration date. "I don't have an issue with aging at all," she said days earlier in Montreal, while on vacation with Aubry and their daughter. "I've had to fight my whole career, so now if I have to fight this age thing, I think I'm up for it."

If before she seemed anxious and insecure, uncomfortable in her own flawless skin, she now appears completely at peace with both the present and the drama-filled past. For the first time in a long while Berry, no stranger to tragedy, is deliriously happy. "Life is about peaks and valleys," she says. "I'm on a peak right now and, honey, I am enjoying it." She's just wrapped shooting for her latest film, *Frankie and Alice*, a psychological thriller about a young woman struggling with multiple personalities, one of which is a White racist. And her dream of motherhood has finally been fulfilled after numerous failed attempts. "When I looked at the stick and saw that I was pregnant, I just fell to the ground. I was so happy," she says. Right on cue, her daughter flashes a smile, exposing four baby teeth. Berry beams with pride. "I thought I knew love before, but I've never felt anything like this."

As a biracial woman, Berry made her choice to identify as African-American because she says, "I always felt very Black. It was easier to connect to that side because that's what I look like." And while Berry wants daughter Nahla (whose name Berry says means "loved one") to make her own decision about how she identifies herself, she's clear that Nahla won't ever choose to be one race over the other. "I doubt my daughter would have that type of identity crisis, because I will not allow her to grow up that way,"



Halle's historic Oscar-winning moment.

*"Young Black artists have no idea how hard it used to be."*

bad eggs I got. I even dated Black men after my last divorce, but this is just where I found love."

Berry has declared she will never marry again. It's a statement that she still stands by. "I feel more married now than I did in any of my actual marriages," she says of her relationship with Aubry. "We live the truth of that and that's more important than a piece of paper." Coming from anyone else that sentiment might sound a bit contrived, but from her it feels like the real deal. Still, after years of kissing toads, Berry is now wise enough to know that life is not a fairy tale. "I've been through two divorces, so I realize that not everything lasts forever," she says. "How long this will last? I don't know. All I know is that at this moment it feels fantastic."

The year 2009 will be another busy one for Berry. Her fragrance, Halle, launches in the spring. "It smells very earthy," she says of the perfume. "Think sandalwood." Then it's on to turning the popular novel *Nappily Ever After* by Trisha R. Thomas into a movie, which she will star in and produce this fall. Berry plans to go bald for the romantic comedy. Yes, bald. Britney bald. Sinead O'Connor bald. Jordan bald. "I'm shaving it off," she says excitedly. "I know. Here comes the controversy, but I have to do it for the role. And it'll grow back—I hope." She laughs long and hard. "Don't worry, in a month I'll have a little fuzz on my head again and I'll hook it up." She's strong enough to handle the controversy, strong enough to rock a baldie and, most important, strong enough to keep fighting for a career that will be meaningful to her—and her child. "I don't want my daughter to look back at my work and think, *Mom sold out*," she says. "I want to leave a legacy that she can be proud of."

**Lola Ogunnaike is a correspondent for CNN's *American Morning*.**

she says. "I'll have many talks with her about race starting at a young age, so she'll know and be a lot more sophisticated about these matters than I was. She'll definitely know about the Black side of who she is and be able to relate to it and celebrate it."

**"I feel more married now than I did in any of my actual marriages."**

After years of painfully public heartbreaks, Berry herself is ready to celebrate. She has finally found true love with Aubry. The couple met at a Versace photo shoot in 2005 and have been together ever since. The fact that he is White doesn't bother her in the least, but she is aware that some may find her decision to date a White man problematic. She jokes away the criticism. "I tried Black men. I tried," she wails in a mock southern accent. "I married two Black men. You know I tried." She laughs again before making clear that "I don't hold all Black males responsible because of the two



Taraji P. Henson was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE by Andrew Macpherson, November 15, 2008, in Los Angeles.

On Taraji, a Romona Keveza dress and H. Stern necklace and ring.

**STAR TO WATCH** | With two films—one with Oscar buzz—in theaters and one more on the way, Taraji P. Henson positions herself for big things By Karen R. Good

# TARAJI P. HENSON

**On the evening Taraji Penda Henson was nominated for three Screen Actors Guild Awards, notably for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Supporting Role in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a Howard University friend e-mailed a YouTube link with a note that read: "Taraji played this song out back in the day." It's**

Angela Bofill's, "Under the Moon and Over the Sky." Unhurried and ethereal, Bofill begins: "Like the wings of a bird / my heart soaring way up high / under the moon and over the sky." What a wonderful metaphor for Henson's ascension.

Back in those Howard days (when some folks called her▷

BERRY: JEFFREY MAYER/GETTY IMAGES; HENSON: STYLIST, TIMOTHY SNELL; HAIR, ROQUE/THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP, ERIC FARRELL/DION PERONNEAU; MANICURIST, KIMMIE K/KARLEE; ARTIST, PROP STYLIST, MARK HELF/THE REX AGENCY.

Cookie), Henson was a theater major, the spiritual sister of her character Vernell in *Talk to Me*. She was wide-eyed and ready, funny and a little electric. She wore long *Poetic Justice* braids and could act her behind off at the Ira Aldridge Theatre. To get herself through school, by day she worked as a secretary at the Pentagon; by night she was a singing waitress on the boat *Spirit of Washington*. Before graduation, she gave birth to her son Marcell. Then when her father told her, “You can’t catch fish on dry land,” Henson left Washington, D.C., with her baby boy, and moved to Hollywood.

“When we moved out here, I had \$700 in my pocket and Marcell had four teeth in his mouth,” Henson, 38, says with a laugh. “Taraji means ‘hope’ in Swahili—that’s all I moved out here with.” Before her acting gigs became more steady, there was the requisite job at the temp agency for a year and a half. “Being a mother upped the ante for me. I had to do it. I had to be a living example.”

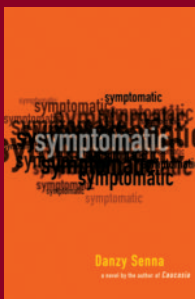
Twelve years later, she is not merely good at her job. She is surprising. Soulful. Alive. Authentic. Present. Imperfect.

Committed. Serious. Memorable. For instance, the scene-stealing 33 seconds in *Hustle & Flow* when her character Shug gifts the studio with the lava lamp. Or in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, when, as Queenie, she discovers a newborn baby who is, impossibly, a little old man.

Keeping them guessing is the name of her game. “I don’t do roles that are repetitive,” she says. “I don’t need to play another downtrodden Black woman. I’m done with that.” And her next films find her in very different roles, as Forest Whitaker’s neglected wife in *Hurricane Season* and Ed Harris’s future daughter-in-law in *Once Fallen*. No wonder directors like Kasi Lemmons have compared her to consummate character actress Ruby Dee, in likeness (those eyes!), gesture and intensity.

But she is not Ruby Dee. She is Taraji P. Henson. She calls her casting in *Button* her “breakthrough moment.” But if you think she came out of nowhere—or plans to leave anytime soon—she says, “Let me tell you about the nowhere I came from. I’ve been chosen and I know that, and I don’t take it lightly.”

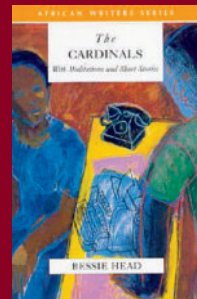
BOOKS WE’D MAKE INTO A MOVIE Five literary works we’d like to see move from the page to the cineplex



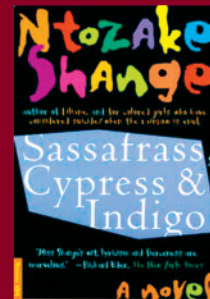
**SYMPTOMATIC**  
BY DANZY SENNA  
In Senna’s overlooked 2004 psychological thriller, Sophie Okonedo would throw down in the lead role of a talented biracial writer who keeps many secrets, including her real identity. This novel has more twists and creativity than in a single frame of *Single White Female*.



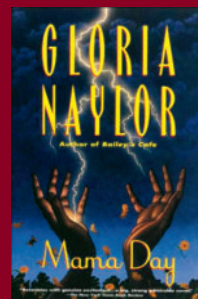
**A DAY LATE AND A DOLLAR SHORT**  
BY TERRY McMILLAN  
McMillan’s 2001 best seller touches on issues so real—addiction, infidelity, teen pregnancy—that many of us will feel as if we’re watching a movie on our own family. Loretta Devine is a natural for matriarch Viola Price.



**THE CARDINALS**  
BY BESSIE HEAD  
Marianne Jean-Baptiste would do African writer Bessie Head proud as one of the heroines in her classic book of short stories. Set in 1960’s South Africa, *The Cardinals* is about an unassuming woman named Mouse, who begins an affair with a man who might destroy her.



**SASSAFRASS, CYPRESS & INDIGO**  
BY NTOZAKE SHANGE  
This 1982 novel about three creative sisters (an artist, a dancer and a musician) trying to find their way in the world would give actresses Gabrielle Union, Nia Long and Sanaa Lathan some of the best work of their careers.



**MAMA DAY**  
BY GLORIA NAYLOR  
When Oprah brought Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* to life, the author’s fans hoped a version of *Mama Day* would follow. We’re still waiting. We believe the love story of Cocoa, George and the wise *Mama Day* could become a love story to rival *For Love of Ivy* or *Mahogany*.

—PATRIK HENRY BASS

BOOK STILLS: COURTESY OF PUBLISHERS; PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD: STYLIST, TIMOTHY SNELL; HAIR, MARGIA HAMILTON/DIVISION PERONNEAU; MAKEUP, DEAN BRYANT/JARED ARTISTS; MANICURIST, KIMMIE K/KARLEE ARTIST; PROP STYLIST, MARK HELF/THE REX AGENCY.



Gina Prince-Bythewood was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE by Andrew Macpherson, November 15, 2008, in Los Angeles.

Gina wears a Marchesa dress and Neil Lane Jewelry bangles; all other jewelry by Ofira.

VISIONARY | As a director, Gina Prince-Bythewood brings to life the complicated and magical aspects of the Black woman’s experience By Mitzi Miller

GINA PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD

If you mention the word *visionary* to Gina Prince-Bythewood, she’ll laugh at you because she feels she hasn’t directed enough films to qualify. But if we’ve learned one thing from the straight-up buffoonery featured in much of urban cinema, it’s that quantity hardly matters. It’s the legacy that counts.

From Prince-Bythewood’s impactful 2000 directorial debut, *Love & Basketball*, to HBO’s *Disappearing Acts*, moviemaking was never just a career but a mission, a responsibility. “My husband [producer-director Reggie Rock Bythewood] and I have a saying: Anyone can portray reality, but an artist portrays what reality *should* be,” she says. “So when filmmakers say it’s okay to put out movies portraying folks getting high and blasting one another because it’s real life, I ask, ‘What purpose are you serving? How are you changing the world?’ As a filmmaker, all

you have is your name. So I want to protect that.” Beyond a doubt, Prince-Bythewood fulfilled a purpose when she helmed *The Secret Life of Bees*, the story of a motherless White girl in the 1960’s South and the amazing sisterhood of Black women who save her. “The line where Lily says, ‘I’m unlovable’—that just wrecked me,” says the now 39-year-old adoptee, who admits to sinking into a little depressive period when her own search for her birth mother turned up what she will only describe as less than desirable results. Now, courageously, Prince-Bythewood chooses multidimensional projects that truly reflect our lives, our triumphs and our sorrows—even when her peers remain unwilling to follow suit. Because they don’t know. Because they can’t understand. Or maybe, because they just don’t care. Fortunately for us, Gina Prince-Bythewood does. >



Diahann Carroll was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE by Andrew Macpherson, November 15, 2008, in Los Angeles.

On Diahann, a St. John gown, Donna Karan coat, Valentino shoes and a Chopard necklace and bracelet. Ring and thin bracelet, stylist's own.

**LEGEND** | At 73, Diahann Carroll has had a life full of Hollywood firsts, but it's the life ahead of her that's most rewarding By Denene Millner

# DIAHANN CARROLL

**She is elegant and sharp—impeccably coiffed and unapologetically grand.** A diva. But heavens, don't dare call Diahann Carroll *that*. As far as she's concerned, we irrepressible young 'uns have scrubbed the word raw—erased all manner of authenticity. "What is a diva? Someone who's wearing too much makeup? Who is demanding? Please." Carroll, pauses for emphasis, then adds simply, "I prefer to be thought of as glamorous."

Conjure an image of Carroll—as the fabulously wicked chanteuse Dominique Deveraux in *Dynasty* or the refined matriarch in *The Five Heartbeats*—with those incredible piercing eyes, high cheekbones and flawless skin, and the word *glamorous* becomes instantly applicable. But Carroll's groundbreaking career warrants much more than this one-dimensional title. Think, original. Rule breaker. History maker. Legend.

After all, it was Carol Diahann Johnson who boldly walked a different path from her African-American contemporaries—forgoing roles as mammies and prostitutes to portray characters that showed a very different side of us. The real us. She became the first African-American actress to win a Tony Award for her role in an interracial romance in 1962's *No Strings*. Carroll tackled TV in 1968, scoring the Golden Globe Award-winning lead as an educated widowed nurse in *Julia*, the first prime-time television series to star an African-American actress who wasn't a servant.

For her part, Carroll insists she wasn't trying to make statements with her roles; she was simply trying to do what felt right to her. It was more, she says, "about doing the best work you can possibly do. Naturally, that involved an awful lot of planning financially in other areas so that you could say, 'No, I don't think I'll be able to do *that* role.'"

We honor Carroll for the roles she did choose, and for the old-school glamour she represents, even today, as she settles into a 73-year-old body that, as it recovers from breast cancer, is immaculately maintained with a good dermatologist, a little plastic surgery she admits, and a personal trainer. "I don't need a new car, I don't need a new coat, but I do need my exercise. That's in the budget," she says.

So are the accoutrements of stardom. "Yes, I paid for my wrinkles by living through everything I have lived through. But that doesn't mean I want to look at them in the mirror," she writes in her best-selling memoir, *The Legs Are the Last to Go* (Amistad).

Which is to say Miss Carroll is still quite the star and still willing to say yes to a role, if it is right. "I don't know if we need the word *retirement*," she says. "It implies you're one step away from the grave, and nobody wants to think of themselves that way. The nicest thing that could happen is, I could enjoy my family, my friends and especially my grandchildren, and one day I'm walking down the street and I drop dead. That would be fabulous." ▸

## SAY IT AGAIN Movie and TV lines worth repeating



"You got big dreams? You want fame? Well, fame costs and right here is where you start paying...in sweat."  
—FAME TV SERIES (1982–87)

"Success is nothing without someone you love to share it with."  
—MAHOGANY (1975)

"'Til you do right by me, everything you even think about gonna fail."  
—THE COLOR PURPLE (1985)

"You sure you want to hang with ol' Eddie Kane, Jr.?"  
—THE FIVE HEARTBEATS (1991)

"If you ain't want him killed, why'd you leave him with me?"  
—DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS (1995)

"King Kong ain't got sh-- on me."  
—TRAINING DAY (2001)

"I'm not bitter. I'm mad as hell."  
—DIARY OF A MAD BLACK WOMAN (2005)

CARROLL: STYLIST, TIMOTHY SNELL; HAIR, ARTHUR JOHNS; MAKEUP, SUSAN CABRAL; MANICURIST, KIMMIE K/KARLEE; ARTIST, PROP STYLIST, MARK HELE/THE REX AGENCY; FAME DANCERS, © MGM/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION.