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Angela Bassett on success, salaries and staying power: ‘I gotta find a new queen to play!’

[Steve Rose](#) Tue 7 Sep 2021 01.00 EDT

She is back on the big screen as an assassin, is reportedly the highest-paid female actor of colour ever for a TV drama – and is moving into producing. She discusses fairness, film-making and why acting is still her first love

Even via a video call, from an anonymous-looking office in New York, against a backdrop of stacked cardboard boxes, Angela Bassett exudes glamour. Dressed down in a sleeveless white top, her hair long and dead straight, she still looks like a million dollars. But it is more Bassett’s irrepressibly expressive personality that leaps out of the screen. She is too self-deprecating and quick to laugh to be hammy, but even out of character she speaks as if she is delivering a monologue: clear and authoritative, with dramatic emphases on certain words, her face and hands in constant motion.

When I ask if there are any roles left she would like to play, she says: “I used to say I wanted to play a queen, because I thought it would be really *good* for audiences to see a *Black* queen on their screens, you know, for people who grew up looking at queens not looking too much like me.”

“Queen” is a word regularly ascribed to Bassett these days. She is the modern model of the smart, powerful, successful Black woman, regularly feted for her apparently ageless beauty (she just turned 63; fans often ask if she is “ageing backwards”), her indomitable self-belief and not least her string of portrayals of real-life icons – Tina Turner, Betty Shabazz (twice), Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King.

Now she is one herself. As her *Master of None* co-star Lena Waithe put it a few years ago: “Angela Bassett is a freaking legend. Without Angela Bassett, there is no Viola Davis. Without Angela Bassett, there is no Halle Berry. She’s the one who came in and did things Meryl Streep was doing, as a Black actress.”

In her 35-year career, Bassett seems to have done it all: stage, television, movies; drama, action, comedy, horror, sci-fi, documentaries, animation. She has played everything from civil rights icons and secret service bosses to triple-breasted circus freaks. “I guess I am every woman, as Chaka [Khan] sings, it’s all in me,” Bassett laughs. Coming from just about anyone else, this would seem like an immodest boast; with Bassett, it is almost a statement of fact.

As for the queen roles, that box has already been ticked. Technically, her Lady Macbeth, on the New York stage in 1998, doesn’t count, she points out. But as we speak she is midway through filming the sequel to the Marvel blockbuster [Black Panther](#), in which she reprises her role as Ramonda, queen of Wakanda. Of course, she is sworn to secrecy on plot particulars, but so far it is going well, she says, although moving on without Chadwick Boseman, [who died of colon cancer last year](#), has been tough. “Everyone felt, the first week of shooting, the presence of Chadwick and missing him on that throne,” she says of her onscreen son. “But we all came together and just paid homage to him before we began, which was wonderful ... everyone just speaking beautiful words about him and expressing how much we care and how he informed and inspired us.”

Recently Bassett became yet another sort of queen. Last month, it was reported that 9-1-1, her hit emergency-services drama, created by the TV supremo Ryan Murphy, had been renewed for a fifth season. Bassett, who plays a tough Los Angeles police officer as well as executive-producing the series, was said to be receiving a fee “north of \$450,000 [£325,000]” an episode. According to Deadline, this “could be the highest ever for an actress of colour on a broadcast drama series”. She won’t confirm or deny it. “You journalists, you say a lot of things,” she laughs.

But surely it must feel ... good? “You know what? One of the things I said early in my career is: ‘I want to work consistently and I want to be paid fairly.’ I think that’s what all of us longed for and, if and when that happens, it’s a good day. And I hope that it paves the way for equity for others. That’s my desire.”

Many were quick to point out that being the highest-paid “actress of colour” is another way of saying Bassett’s white counterparts have been paid far more. The cast of Friends, for example, were paid \$1m an episode in the final seasons back in the early 00s. “There’s a saying that I like: all in the bed or all on the floor,” she says. “If

we're in it together, we all sleep on the floor in lean times. But when we're doing better, let's all have comfort, all in the bed."

No one could deny Bassett has earned her reputation, or her salary. She began life very much on the floor. In her own words, she was "a little girl who came up through the projects in St Petersburg, Florida, with no one to point her in the right direction, but a mother who was a little on the dramatic side herself". Her early childhood was marked by several changes of address and her parents' divorce, but her mother set high standards for her. She went on to study African American studies at Yale, followed by a master's at its school of drama, where she met her future husband, Courtney B Vance.

As an actor in New York in the 80s, she landed only small stage roles and soap operas. If she had an appearance coming up, she would take the TV guide down to Kinko's and make photocopies of it for her family and friends. "You know: 'Thursday, such and such a date, at such and such a time on this show,' and cut it in four pieces and stamp it and mail it to folks like: 'Catch me on this!'" Seeking bigger roles, she moved to Los Angeles in 1988 and was just in time to catch the first wave of mainstream African American film-making. A role in [John Singleton's seminal Boyz n the Hood](#) opened the door. More work followed: as Betty Shabazz in [Spike Lee's Malcolm X](#); as the put-upon matriarch Katherine Jackson in the hit TV miniseries *The Jacksons: An American Dream* (Michael Jackson requested she be cast). "The plan was to be in LA for six months, see how it goes. And I'm still there, so it went pretty well, I guess."

Her real breakthrough came in 1993, as Tina Turner in the biopic *What's Love Got To Do With It?*. It is still a role that defines her in many ways – the combination of vulnerability and strength, the evolution from shy newcomer to resilient, independent woman, the sheer energy of her onstage performances. Her portrayal was made all the more daunting by the fact that Turner, on whose autobiography the film was based, was watching over her. Turner was largely supportive, Bassett says, taking her through photo albums of her life, teaching her the dance moves. "She wasn't there day to day, but her presence and her support was there. She'd tell my choreographer: 'Michael, let her learn Proud Mary *without* the heels first!' I've never done anything as hard as *What's Love ...*"

The role earned her a Golden Globe and an Oscar nomination and bigger roles followed: in African American stories such as *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, as well as in more mainstream Hollywood fare such as *Strange Days* and *Contact*. If she had a hard time along the way as a young Black woman in white, male-dominated 90s Hollywood, she doesn't really tell it that way, although you can't exactly picture Bassett being easily pushed around. She attributes much of her success to good fortune. She says: "Probably a big part of my career is offers and opportunities that come to me, as opposed to me consciously seeking them out – 'I want to work with this person,' you know. I guess I'm not as proactive as that."

That seems to be changing, though. Rather than resting on her reputation as the esteemed actor playing celebrated women, Bassett seems to have been heading in the opposite direction. At times, it almost seems as if she is out to trash her dignified image. "Sometimes, the not-so-highly esteemed can be more fun," she says.

In recent years, Bassett has appeared in comedies such as *Master of None*, *BoJack Horseman* and HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (where she played the leader of a "Bad Bitch Support Group"). Before *9-1-1*, she was part of Murphy's lurid American Horror Story troupe for several seasons, where her roles included Marie Laveau, an immortal Voodoo priestess and hair-salon proprietor in New Orleans (another queen role, you could say). Then she was Desiree Dupree, the three-breasted freakshow performer with an enlarged clitoris that meant she was mistaken for a man. You can't picture Streep doing this kind of stuff.

"Three breasts and a ding-a-ling, as the character was described in the script," she laughs. "When I first read it, I was like: 'Yeah, this is going to be different for audiences.'" After that, she was the bisexual vampire Ramona Royale, who got it on with Lady Gaga. She embraces the ripe, lurid premises of these shows. "In Ryan Murphy's world, bigger is best and more is more. I get to chew some scenery."

There is more of the same in her latest: *Gunpowder Milkshake*, a female-dominated action movie led by Karen Gillan. Directed by Navot Papushado, it is stylised pulp violence, heavy on the Americana and choreographed action sequences, somewhat superficial in its feminist sentiments. Bassett plays the tweed-suited leader of a top-secret society of female assassins, headquartered in a library. Her weapon of choice is a pair of hammers, with which she dispatches innumerable male assailants

in the children's section. "I was like: 'Why can't I have a gun? Or hatchet, or a knife? But hammers?'"

It was not exactly a stretch for her dramatically, but, again, she relished stepping out of her comfort zone. "I enjoyed the stunt work, you know, the physicality. I haven't had that in quite a while, maybe since *What's Love ...* But it was very hot, in Berlin, in the summertime, to be doing action sequences in a wool jacket and pants ... in heels ... in the dark."

This could be seen as Bassett coasting along, having paid her dues in more demanding dramatic roles earlier in her career. There is a danger when actors attain "queen" status that they find it harder to disappear into a character. Their presence becomes almost ceremonial – like a real queen. Bassett hasn't abandoned her "all in the bed" principles, though. Off-screen, she has been a vocal advocate for Democratic politics, humanitarian charities and Black causes. As a producer, her and Vance's production company is also working in that direction. "We're telling stories from historical and Black perspectives," she says. "That's our mission: interesting, dynamic stories, whether historical or fictional. And behind the scenes to empower those who are trying to get a foothold or who might need an opportunity."

Producing projects in the pipeline include a four-part documentary series titled *One Thousand Years of Slavery*, in association with the Smithsonian Channel and the UK's Channel 5, directed by David Olusoga. Another is a drama series based on the 1921 Tulsa race massacre and the destruction of the city's "Black Wall Street". She doesn't know yet if she will take a performing role in it, or even a directing one. "We'll see about that. Because a lot of things you have to turn down when you're doing 18 episodes of a series." She is referring to her forthcoming season of *9-1-1*.

But performing seems to be its own reward for Bassett. Her enthusiasm is palpable whatever she is talking about, but never more so than when the subject is acting. "That's still my first love, that's still where I get most excited," she says, eyes lighting up. "And, as someone who's result-oriented, it's something that happens far quicker than trying to get a project off the ground as a producer."

"As an actor, I say yes to something, I buy into whatever dream that is, if I think it's something that will help me grow and it's an idea I would love to get out in the marketplace, in the world, in the ears, in the heart, in the eyes of audiences. So,

whichever way the mop flops in terms of if it's successful or not, I glean something from it as a human being.

"So yeah, I still find a great deal of personal satisfaction on the acting side; I don't think I will ever give that up. As long as I can remember my lines and hit my mark." She is always looking for the next thing. "I gotta find a new queen I wanna play."

Gunpowder Milkshake is in cinemas and on Sky Cinema from 17 September.