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'9-1-1' Star Angela Bassett on Athena's 'Messy' Romantic Backstory, Future With Bobby

Fox drama star also tells TheWrap about connecting with Pepi Sonuga, who played Young Athena

Jennifer Maas November 4, 2019 @ 6:00 PM

"9-1-1" finally cracked open the tough exterior of Athena Grant (Angela Bassett) with Monday's episode "Athena Begins," an installment of the Fox first-responder drama that revealed the heartbreaking story that made her the woman she is today: as a young woman, Athena (played by Pepi Sonuga) decided to become a cop instead of a lawyer because she fell for a an LAPD officer named Emmett Washington (Jeff Pierre) and they were to be married — until he was shot during a gas station robbery.

For 30 years, Athena kept her late fiance a secret from everyone new who came into her life, including her former husband Michael (Rockmund Dunbar), her new husband Bobby (Peter Krause), and her children. But the truth came out in the present day, when the murder weapon from the cold case resurfaced and led Athena to the killer, who she arrested.

Bassett told TheWrap the episode explained a lot — both for her and for "9-1-1" viewers — about a woman who has kept so much bottled up for over two seasons.

"It helped to explain the relationship between her and her mom, why there's some tension there," she said. "Maybe it explains how she could not see, or refuse to see, or have blinders on, in terms of her ex-husband's sexuality. Because he claims somewhere

in there, she knew. So what her awareness was in terms of that. It's just a very human and complicated and messy story, the story of Emmett."

Athena was finally able to get closure tonight by arresting the person responsible for killing her beloved Emmett, though when she found him he was a changed man, who confessed he turned his life around after that day and has spent the last three decades helping at-risk youth find their way. But Athena, despite this man's attempts to make amends through living a better life, decided she had to bring him to justice.

"I think that it may go a little against Athena's playbook or how she has structured her life if she hadn't arrested him," Bassett said. "I remember one of the previous episodes, Athena was with a young boy and he did the right thing, he helped save the day — the Latino boy with the trucker and he helped, there was a whole emergency crash on the freeway — and he ended up helping to do the right thing, but he still had to face the consequence from the previous actions."

"So I think that arresting him is in line with who she is," she continued. "But I don't know how long he'll be in prison though, good behavior, some time off maybe. But you have to understand that of course she's very sorry for the fact that her fiance was killed and I think it helps with her closure of that, that she wasn't able to deal with something she had to hide away, tuck away, not speak of for 30 years. So I don't think there was any world in which she could have let him go — although she can appreciate the turn of his life and accept his humanity."

Bassett said that tonight's story was as much about Athena's past love as her current loves and how both Michael and Bobby dealt with this piece of Athena's life.

"Well Athena and Bobby are still hanging in there, they're still strong," Bassett said. "They've risen to the occasion, they've recognized they are non-traditional. But he handles it very well. The kids are accepting and easy with Michael. I think he was wonderful in accepting Bobby into his ex-wife's life. So she has the best of all worlds: she has her love life together, but also she has her best friend, the father of her children. And that's working. And Bobby and Michael seem to have forged a kind of bond and

probably are a little closer after realizing they were both kept in the dark by the woman they love and maybe can bond even more over that."

Sonuga didn't get to spend much time with Bassett on set, seeing as they weren't in any scenes together, but Bassett did take the time to connect with her when they did cross paths.

"I made sure I went over and said hello and embraced her," she said. "Reached out and grabbed her and just believed that she was doing a great job."

"9-1-1" airs Mondays at 8/7c on Fox.