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Angela Bassett Is Still Burning It Down

The actress and producer has blazed a legendary trail. And she doesn't plan on stopping anytime soon.

By [Maya Allen](#) Published on January 5, 2022 @ 07:50AM

Of course when Angela Bassett logs on to our Zoom call, she is wearing a glorious headwrap and the sun is framing her perfectly. Should we expect anything less? As an actor who has portrayed some of the most righteous and regal icons of our time — Rosa Parks, Betty Shabazz, Tina Turner, and, fictionally speaking, Ramonda, the Queen of [Wakanda, in Black Panther](#) — Bassett is a cinema legend. Her propensity for taking on these roles is a reflection of her commitment to breaking down barriers. "Thirty and 40 years ago when I started out, Black characters were weighted too heavily in the negative," says Bassett. "I was always mindful of those images. What are you saying about me and who I represent as a woman of color? There's complexity to us. There's beauty to us. There's strength to us. There's compassion to us. There are so many wonderful things."

Let's take it back to your Yale heyday. [Bassett attended Yale and has a B.A. (1980), an M.F.A. (1983), and an honorary doctorate degree (2018) from her alma mater.] How did that shape you as an artist?

I was there for seven years, so I got to know the place. [laughs] Unless you're a superhero, a beast, or a monster with so much self-esteem that it seeps out of every pore, you deal with imposter syndrome. Artists are so introspective. You wonder if you're good enough or if you can handle the place. I would literally stand in front of my mirror and give myself a good talking-to. I'd say, "How long do you want to be overwhelmed? Will 10 minutes serve? Fifteen?" And I would answer, "Yes, all right. Well, have your pity party, but then after that, wash your face, comb your hair, and

go do what you need to do." And I guess that was my way of therapizing myself in that moment.

I'm sure being a Black woman navigating that space during that time in the world was also challenging.

We all have that experience of trying to prove ourselves and show our worth. But dealing with the additional layer of being a woman and also a Black woman, it's a journey and a constant battle. It was incredibly powerful in building my self-esteem early on when I would get on those stages and receive the response that I wanted from the audiences and my peers.

It must have done something, because your roles have always been so impactful.

I used to love that song by Al Jarreau, "Somebody's Watching You." You never know the impact your work is making. It's the women in my family who have influenced my roles. Growing up without every convenience and then seeing my mother who persevered, and she still had grace. She would make a dollar out of 15 cents. She had resilience and threw herself into every detail, even if it was the way she took pride in setting a table. On the other hand, having an aunt who was an educator and went on to get her master's and Ph.D. And growing up with my grandmother and great-grandmother, imagining what their struggles might have been like in Georgia in the early 1900s and what they endured. They continued to be gracious, beautiful, warm, and easy women with a smile and a laugh, despite it all.

Do you have the career that you've always dreamed of?

It's so much more than I ever dreamed of. I mean, theater is my first love. I love the stage. [My husband] Courtney [B. Vance] and I did one of playwright John Guare's plays years ago [*His Girl Friday*], and Guare said, "Angela, you're a theater animal. You command the stage and the audience." It was the highest compliment.

I know that if you do everything in your ability, to the best of your ability, you've won. Then you can rest your head.

— Angela Bassett

Speaking of command, *What's Love Got to Do with It* really catapulted your career. What was it like jumping into Tina Turner's dancing shoes?

It truly was and still is the most difficult and emotionally, spiritually, physically demanding role that I've ever portrayed. That was the assignment. And in that moment, I learned how strong internally I could be. I ached from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. I lost my voice. If there was one more step I could take before sleeping, I had to take it or I would feel like I cheated and was in a deficit the next day. I know that if you do everything in your ability, to the best of your ability, you've won. Then you can rest your head.

Every time I watch that film and see your arm muscles, I have the urge to go to the gym afterward.

I do too. [laughs]

Please do share your workout routine.

I'm feeling quite guilty because I haven't worked out in a week and a half and I can outeat any workout. As a dear friend and I are fond of saying, "The horses are out of the barn, running in the field," and I've got to get the horses back in the barn, where it's tight. I always feel stronger when I work out, but it's mind over matter. It's something that I need to do for my head, not just for looking good. It's very helpful for my stress level.

You've mentioned before that you're not fond of people saying things like, "You look so good for your age."

Yeah, I think when we take care of ourselves, we do look good for our age, whatever age that is, you know?

That's very Stella of you [Bassett's character in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*]! If she got her groove back in 2002, do you think she should go about it in the same way?

Why not? [laughs] I can't tell you how many times ladies have come up to me and said, "I got my groove back." They're embracing their sensuality and youth. In Hollywood, there was a time when people believed that once an actress turns 40, it's over. But no, those things that make us who we are — our sensuality, sexuality, compassion, and intelligence — that doesn't come to an end. It deepens and ripens, you know? It's all in the attitude.

Absolutely. I know you inspired [renowned aesthetics expert] Dr. Barbara Sturm to produce a line for darker skin tones a few years ago. How do you maintain such amazing skin?

Well, definitely I would have to say my aesthetician is a big part of it. I found a great one, Skin by Mamie [Mamie McDonald]. She is so gifted at what she does. As August Wilson once wrote, after two hours with her, "I am shining like new money." I don't really wear makeup if I don't have to. I'm trying to just keep healthy skin that I don't need to cover up. Of course, I have things that I deal with, like hormonal changes and melasma. But I feel like so much of who we are is on the inside. So if you're stressed, it shows, and it shows in your skin.

What is the most badass thing you have ever done?

I think it was to confidently go after my dreams without someone providing personal instruction and direction for me. I had to figure a lot of it out for myself. My senior year in college, I told myself, "I'm going to give my own dreams a shot. And should they not work out the way I desire, I have all the time in the world to maybe give someone else's a shot." I look up to every single woman who has the courage to follow her heart. Any woman in any discipline who's doing her thing. It takes courage and bravery to do it anyway when you're unsure.

I thought maybe you were going to say Bernadine's carburning scene from *Waiting to Exhale*. The memes and GIFs are endless.

That was something I would only dream about doing, but I would not have the guts to really do it. I'm such a good girl. Sometimes in life we want to blow it up and burn it down! [laughs] But we can't always. We must remain calm, cool, and collected. Before that, I had not seen such a powerful image in film that had such a dramatic flair.

It's been 26 years since that film was released. Whitney Houston was phenomenal in it too. What was it like working so closely with her?

She was delightful and beautiful, always dancing and singing. She was such a lover girl. Sometimes we are put in these gilded cages and we must present ourselves in a certain way, and then we are held to that standard. She had intense scrutiny and pressure on her, but she was just—you know how LL Cool J would say, an "Around

the Way Girl"? [laughs] She was such a beauty and a light. She showed up ready and prepared, honey, every single day, more than the so-called actors. It was impressive.

We've had so much loss over the years of Black talent you've worked with, like Whitney and Chadwick Boseman. How do you process it?

The loss can be overwhelming, but I try to remain grateful for the moments I've had with them and for the contribution that they've made to my life and to culture. Instead of leaning into the loss, I lean into the blessing that their life was and will appear to be in spirit. When you're a person of faith, you know that we are much more than just flesh and blood. We're spirit, heart, and soul as well. And we trust that those things remain with us.

Last August you received a salary raise to reportedly \$450,000 an episode for your show 9-1-1, where you also serve as executive producer. This made you one of the highest-paid actresses in television. Have you always been about asking for what you deserve?

Everyone wants to keep the lights on, but I've never been motivated solely by money or fame. For me, it's always and only been for the joy of following my dreams. That's what makes me feel alive. Now, it's good to be paid. That is one thing that I've said to myself since early on in my career. I mean, I literally would say, "I want to work in roles that can change me and change the conversation. I want to work consistently. And I want to be paid fairly." It's about knowing your worth and standing on it. Being in positions and places where your worth is appreciated is a good thing. I'm glad that it can influence others. There is a bit of me that's from a generation where we don't talk openly about things like that. But I understand what generation this is today.

Whatever a woman's doing, I'm supporting and applauding her. Because we don't feel 100% every day. We need to be able to look out and find inspiration.

— Angela Bassett

In such a competitive industry, it seems like there is such a genuine camaraderie between you and your fellow actor friends.

I love to support my sisters, and I cheer for them. I cheer for their successes. I cheer for the mark they make and every effort they make. We are a reflection of each other. I've always been that actor who gets excited to see other actors at auditions.

Because a lot of times you might find yourself as the only Black woman, or one of a few. It's wonderful with *9-1-1* that I get to work with Aisha [Hinds] because I was such a big fan of hers watching *Underground*. And then for them to bring in Marsha Warfield to portray her mother, who I grew up watching on *Night Court*. [Regina \[King\]](#) is my sister, and I am so peacock-proud of everything she does. I'm so proud of [Halle \[Berry\]](#) for making her directorial debut [with the Netflix movie *Bruised*]. Whatever a woman's doing, I'm supporting and applauding her. Because we don't feel 100% every day. We need to be able to look out and find inspiration.

How do you recharge when you're not feeling your best?

I turn to Courtney and our kids, friends, and trusted confidants, because I can just say, "Oh, Lord, it was too much." I know I can rage with them. I can't go out in public and do it, but I can burn it up at home. [laughs] And it's like, "OK, now I'm over it and I'm ready to go." It's where you can be your sister girl most authentic self, and your true self is not pretty and on all the time. We all have those moments.

In 2020 you and your husband launched your own production company [Bassett Vance Productions]. Do you see yourselves as leaders among the community?

There's a part of you that recognizes that you're held up in a position to inspire. But then there's a part where that feels like a lot. So do allow us to misstep and to try just like everyone else. And especially when you try to get projects up, some will come to fruition and some may take decades. It's wonderful to be in a position to provide opportunity to the marketplace and to the screen, large and small. We both started out as simply actors, but as you continue and get stronger with experience, you take the opportunities, and you're grateful.

You're always working. Did you get any downtime over the past two years?

My life can have that nonstop locomotive vibe, so I appreciated being home and being quiet. To be honest, I enjoy my own company, so I kind of loved it. [laughs]

Lead Image: Alaïa dress. Cartier High Jewelry bracelet.

Photography by Anthony Maule. Styling by Ron Hartleben/Cartel & Co. Hair by Randy Stodghill/Opus Beauty. Makeup by D'Andre Michael. Manicure by Saccia/Opus Beauty. Location: Studio Stropa.

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