



Angela Bassett stars as the president of the United States in the new political thriller *Zero Day*, streaming now on Netflix.

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What's Luck Got to Do with It?

Longevity in Hollywood can be elusive—unless you're Angela Bassett. With a smart new series that puts her in the Oval Office and a summer blockbuster on the horizon, she delivers a master class in both elegance and endurance.

BY MICHAEL CALLAHAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUVEN AFANADOR STYLED BY JENNIFER AUSTIN

It's not so simple to begin an interview with Angela Bassett, who has been a movie star for many years and has three degrees from Yale and a million magazine profiles under her belt. So I kick things off with something obvious: How, in an industry where a career can be measured in days, has she managed to build one that has lasted decades?

Those deep mahogany eyes flicker, blazing and direct, like headlights suddenly turning on. "Oh my gosh," she says, her mouth slowly creeping into a wry smile. "You should have asked me how to solve world hunger."

We're sitting on the terrace of the Langham Huntington in Pasadena, the kind of grand hotel where a century ago women in silk stockings and cloche hats went for tea. The terrace overlooks the pool, which, with its green and white striped umbrellas, gives the whole scene a slight *Tender Is the Night* vibe.

Bassett wears a fitted navy bolero jacket over a white tank, designer jeans with rips in all the right places, and tasteful gold jewelry. Her hair is a wild mane of curls, her skin dewy and flawless; she is 66 and looks 20 years younger. But it's that legendary gaze—wide, piercing, intense—that draws you in.

While her enduring presence in the zeitgeist may be a mystery to her, it shouldn't be to anyone else. The determined daughter of a single mother, Bassett, who was born in New York City and raised in St. Petersburg, Florida, had instilled in her early on the belief that she could, would, and in fact must transcend her modest beginnings to achieve something great. To be somebody.

She did, and she is. With a four-decade career still going strong, Bassett stands as an icon, revered as much for her powerhouse portrayals of some of the most famous women of recent times (Coretta Scott King, Betty Shabazz, Tina Turner) as for her versatility. Her body of work includes *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *Waiting to Exhale*, and the *Black Panther* films; she directed a 2015 Whitney Houston biopic; she has had star turns in the Ryan Murphy *American Horror Story* ecosystem; and she is currently starring in and executive-producing Murphy's high-octane ABC cop drama *9-1-1*, which returns this month to complete its eighth season.

For her latest role Bassett is stepping into an office—the Oval one. On the Netflix limited series *Zero Day* (streaming now), Bassett stars as Evelyn Mitchell, president of the United States, whose predecessor is pulled out of retirement to help deal with a crippling cyber-attack. The role puts Bassett head-to-head with Robert De Niro, who plays the former president; it's a reunion of a pair of actors who last worked together in 2001's *The Score*. "Being intimidated by him is easy," she says. "He's so serious, all business. We don't waste any of his time. You want to show up and be ready to go."

In casting the part of Evelyn Mitchell, "we knew the challenge would be having a former president being called in to see the current president—and the current president's got to be in the slightly higher chair," says Eric Newman, *Zero Day*'s co-creator and executive producer. "But when your former president is Robert De Niro, who are you going to get who you'll watch and think, Oh, here's someone who can tell him what to do."

If there is one obvious truth about Angela Bassett, it's that she has been ready to go from the start. Her mother was a strict but loving force who insisted on excellence, and as a result Bassett grew up as a

realistic dreamer—dazzled by theater but unswervingly clear-eyed about the challenges that awaited trying to make it in that world.

"You're just trying to find little pieces where you are, little moments of daylight to be able to do this," Bassett says, reflecting on her early days. "So no matter how small it was, it was just a joy and a blessing. I wonder if that's why, when I get the opportunity, whatever opportunity it is, to perform or to be in front of an audience, to me it's daylight. It's really... You don't take it for granted." She repeats it, this time in a whisper. "Don't take it for granted."

No one knew the moment would go viral, but it was hardly surprising when it did. At the BAFTA awards in 2023, Ariana DeBose performed an opening number saluting that year's female nominees, and rapped (in a Jamaican accent, no less), "Angela Bassett did the thing." Thousands of snarky social media comments followed. (Ever the empath, Bassett DM'd DeBose "to make sure she was okay because, you know, it's a lot of attention," as she told *Variety* afterward.) But here is the thing: Despite the whole performance being what the kids today might label "cringe," everyone got what she meant.

Because if there is one overarching theme in Bassett's career, it's this: I am a force of nature, and you are going to see it. There may be no other actress whose oeuvre so loudly defines who she is. Her commitment to bringing take-no-prisoners Black female characters alive onscreen is no accident.

"All of that, I think, was thrown into the pot that is my life, the gumbo that is my life, and seasoned it, so that my choices were a strong woman who was in control of herself and her situation," she says. "So that appealed to me. Gentle is something different. But weak? She never takes command of her situations? That didn't appeal to me."

The roots of that attitude go back to her childhood. She excelled as a student and eventually won a scholarship to Yale, where she

earned a BA in African American Studies and an MFA from the School of Drama. (She was awarded an honorary doctorate by the university in 2018.)

A trip to Washington, DC, as part of a program called A Presidential Classroom for Young Americans when she was in high school changed her life: Her group was taken to see *Of Mice and Men* at the Kennedy Center, in a production that starred James Earl Jones.

Bassett stands up from the café table and begins acting out the scene in which George puts a gun to Lennie's head: "Do you see it? Can you look out there? Do you see it?" Here she is, giving me full-on Angela Bassett, right in the middle of the hotel terrace.

"Oh my God, it just wrecked me," she says, sliding back into her chair. "I remember everyone leaving the theater, and I was just sitting in my seat, crying." Nearly a decade later she met Jones while he was doing *Master Harold*...and the Boys and told him he was the reason she had gone into acting. "Oh," he said in that trademark baritone, "you are a darling."

At Yale she suffered from impostor syndrome, unsure she could compete with the privileged kids surrounding her. "They didn't have that term for it then," she says. "But I felt a little of that. I still do feel that. But you put on a face, and you go, and you do it anyway. Courage is doing it even when you're scared to do it, right?"

After college she moved to New York City to pursue theater, taking jobs as a receptionist at the tony Georgette Klinger beauty salon on Madison Avenue and as a photo researcher at *U.S. News & World* ➡

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In addition to her role on *Zero Day*, Bassett stars in the Ryan Murphy police procedural *9-1-1*, which is now in its eighth season.

CHANEL CAPE, TOP, JEANS, SHOES, EARRINGS, AND BELT (WORN AS NECKLACE). CHANEL HIGH JEWELRY CAMELIA VENITEN NECKLACE

Bassett isn't only an actor. She and her husband Courtney B. Vance have a production company developing projects for the screen.

NINA RICCI DRESS.
CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN
SHOES



MAX MARA
JACKET AND VEST.
POMELLATO
EARRINGS AND
RINGS; HIGH
JEWELRY NECKLACE.
JULIA CLANCEY
TURBAN

Bassett has been nominated for an Oscar twice, and in 2024 she was given the academy's honorary award to mark extraordinary achievement.

GABRIELA HEARST
BLAZER AND PANTS.
LE SILLA SHOES. VHERNIER
EARRINGS AND RINGS



SIMONE ROCHA DRESS.
LUGANO EARRINGS



Report while she dashed around Manhattan auditioning. She began booking roles, eventually touring with the play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which brought her out west. While in L.A. she decided to try her hand at film.

Her breakout role came in 1993, in *What's Love Got to Do with It*, the Tina Turner biopic that earned Bassett her first Academy Award nomination, for Best Actress. Two years later she cemented her status with her role as the simmering Bernadine, whose husband leaves her for his white bookkeeper in *Waiting to Exhale*. The film's most iconic scene is a harrowing two-and-a-half-minute cyclone of Bernadine, whirling with rage, reciting to herself all the sacrifices she has made and all the broken promises she has heard over the course of her marriage, until she eventually lugs her husband's belongings outside, stuffs them in his car, douses them in lighter fluid, ignites a cigarette, and tosses the lit match through the sun roof.

"You can give Angela 10 notes, and she can pour them into the character and incorporate them all at the same time," says *Waiting to Exhale*'s director, Forest Whitaker. "I've never seen anyone else with that capacity or ability."

British actress Marianne Jean-Baptiste, currently generating awards buzz for her own star turn in Mike Leigh's *Hard Truths*, is one of Bassett's closest friends. She says it might surprise people to know that, for all her legendary intensity, one of Bassett's best qualities is her sense of humor.

"She's extremely funny," Jean-Baptiste says. "I mean tears-rolling-down-your-face, clutching-your-stomach funny. Her timing is ridiculous."

Of course, some of Bassett's public moments have been no laughing matter. In 2023 she was picked apart by the press for her dour reaction to losing the Best Supporting Actress Oscar to Jamie Lee Curtis. As Curtis's name was announced, Bassett, resplendent in violet, sat still, looking both beatific and devastated. She later told Oprah Winfrey that she was "gobsmacked," both by the loss and the chatter that ensued.

"I found it interesting," she says now. "Interesting that I wouldn't be allowed to be disappointed at an outcome where I thought I was deserving." While she may have moved past the episode, she hasn't forgotten it. "I love applauding people. But in that moment..." She trails off, talks about how she had thought she had put in the work to be recognized, then corrects herself. "No, I have put in: put in the time, put in good work over time. I didn't think that was a gift. I thought it was a given." The following year the academy bestowed on her an honorary Oscar.

"That's a tough one, because she's really respected among her peers, and maybe the establishment has not done [right by her]," says Jean-Baptiste. "But I think it's about opportunity. It's about getting the chance to play different things, and I'm not sure those opportunities have been on the table for her."

Whitaker adds, "I thought she deserved the Academy Award for *What's Love Got to Do with It*, her performance was so strong. Hopefully she'll be acknowledged in every way, whether that's Cannes or Berlin or anywhere around the world."

In *Zero Day*, Bassett's President Mitchell is an iron butterfly who rocks power pantsuits and glares at everyone who crosses her path.

A nervy, twisty, adrenaline rush of a series, *Zero Day* boasts a starry cast—in addition to De Niro there are Dan Stevens, Joan Allen, Matthew Modine, and Lizzy Caplan, to name a few—along with lots of shadows, conspiracy theories, betrayals, strained family ties, political machinations, and a mysterious dry cleaner. No one is who they seem to be, and everyone is hiding something. It's Tom Clancy as channeled by Aaron Sorkin, with a dash of M. Night Shyamalan.

The role is a slow burn for Bassett, but it's still a thunderstorm of a performance. You just can't stop looking at her, even when she's in a Stanford sweatshirt meandering through the White House and barking at De Niro on the phone. Newman calls her "great" in the part, convincing enough that he could imagine an actual career in politics for the star. "She could have been president if she'd set her mind to it," he says.

For a new generation of viewers, Bassett is best known for her performance as Athena Grant, the glowering Los Angeles police sergeant on *9-1-1*. In one memorable scene a confused suspect asks her, "How did you get this number?" Sitting in her squad car, she lasers a look and replies, "You called 911. Dumbass."

It might seem odd that, after two Oscar nominations, an honorary Academy Award, an Emmy, two Golden Globes, and roles in blockbuster big screen franchises (*Black Panther*, *Mission: Impossible*), Bassett would sign on for the grind of episodic television—although that is something her husband of 27 years, actor Courtney B. Vance, did when he logged five seasons on NBC's *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* from 2001 to 2006. Bassett was on the last year of NBC's *ER*, but four more years passed before she accepted the first of three supporting roles in FX's anthology series *American Horror Story*.

Still, Murphy's *9-1-1*, which Bassett has headlined since its debut in 2018, is different. It's an old school network cop show, albeit one with the producer's trademark over-the-top theatrics.

"I never thought about doing a procedural. I never thought about doing a series, really," Bassett says. But her experience on *American Horror Story*—the bold storytelling, the quality writing—convinced her that with Murphy at the helm, they could breathe new life into an old format. It didn't hurt that, at a reported \$450,000 per episode, she has also become one of the highest-paid actresses of color in the history of television. And with contemporary TV's shorter seasons, she still has room for the occasional big screen turn; she's reprising her role as CIA director Erika Sloane opposite Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible—The Final Reckoning*, due out in May.

In an essay for *Vulture* last November titled "Angela Bassett Is Giving the Full Angela Bassett on *9-1-1*," entertainment writer Brian Grubb recapped the series's season eight premiere, in which Athena attempts to land a passenger plane on a freeway, with a child copiloting and a swarm of bees wreaking havoc. Which all sounds ludicrous, but it also proves that Bassett can pull off almost anything just by being Angela Bassett.

"On another show, in another context, with another actor, maybe this doesn't work as well. Maybe you want a performance in which the actor vanishes into the role," Grubb wrote. But those rules don't apply to her. "Angela Bassett," he concluded, "is giving you the full god-damned Angela Bassett on network television every Thursday night."

In other words, she's still doing the thing. **T&C**

In addition to her recent triumphant run on TV, Bassett will return to the big screen this year in May's *Mission: Impossible—The Final Reckoning*.

MICHAEL KORS COLLECTION SHIRT, SKIRT, BELT, AND BRIEFS. CARTIER HIGH JEWELRY BRACELET, CARTIER LIBRE RING, PANTHERE DE CARTIER NECKLACE AND EARRINGS

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