

Interview: Angela Bassett Takes a Leap in ‘Jumping the Broom’

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CHICAGO – Angela Bassett has a quiet sophistication, when combined with her movie star presence only enhances her unique beauty. She is also a superior actor, taking on an intriguing role as a matriarch in the upcoming film “Jumping the Broom.”

The film regards an African-American tradition, the old custom of “jumping the broom” to secure their vows. Bassett plays Claudine Watson, the upper class mother of soon-to-be-wed daughter Sabrina (Paula Patton). The film features a clash between Bassett’s character and that of the groom’s family, who are decidedly working class. The levels of interacting, the exposition of class issues and the traditions in current African American culture sets this story apart from previous films in the same genre.



After earning her Masters Degree at the Yale School of Drama in the 1980s, Bassett took to the New York stage, most notably in two of August Wilson’s “Pittsburgh Cycle” plays. She expanded with parts in film and TV, including “Boyz in the Hood” (1991). Breakthrough recognition would come in the next couple of years, as Bassett co-starred with Denzel Washington in “Malcolm X” (as Malcolm’s wife Betty Shabazz) and her Oscar nominated role as Tina Turner in “What’s Love Got to Do with It” (1993).

Later in the 1990s, Bassett would collaborate twice with author Terry McMillan in “Waiting to Exhale” (1995) and “How Stella Got Her Groove Back” (1998). The last ten years has had her playing civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks in a TV movie, and portraying a physician during the last two seasons of NBC’s “ER.”

Angela Bassett was recently in Chicago to promote Jumping the Broom, and sat down to talk with HollywoodChicago.com about her varied career.

HollywoodChicago: There are many themes in *Jumping the Broom* having to do with the history of African Americans in this country over the last 50 years; opportunity, pride, equality and the diversity of the wealth class systems emerging. What part of the script attracted you to those themes and where did you find the character of the matriarch Claudine?

Angela Bassett: My goodness. [laughs] Can I have that question? Can I take that with me?

HollywoodChicago: You absolutely can, you can take anything you'd like.

Bassett: [Laughs] Well, I visited Martha's Vineyard [where her character lives] two times. That wasn't part of my growing up experience, it was quite an eye opener for me. My kid's godparents had been going every summer for 18 years, and it's different. But it's so civilized and wonderful.

We've had other movies try to be like this but they feel a little more stereotypical and broad. Since I was asked to play Ms. Watson rather than the working class Ms. Taylor, I thought it would be a lot of fun. I hadn't played that type of role before, well-bred and from money. I just wanted her to be grounded, a real woman getting it done. Trying to make the best with the situation.

HollywoodChicago: What do you personally think of the tradition of 'jumping the broom'? Given that it is a powerful symbol of the African American past in this country, do you understand, as was portrayed in the film, the younger couple's difficulty with the tradition, or do you feel that this symbol is a necessary and powerful presence in an African American union?

Bassett: By the end of the film, you think 'what is all the fuss?' It's sweet and delightful and it's a nod to history. The history of African Americans in this country is amazing, it's painful but it's about solidarity and the overcoming, the aspect of inspiration, that which inspires other parts of the world.

They look to the civil rights movement today as a means of inspiration for their own struggle. When you go outside the United States, and go to these places and realize, 'we're an inspiration to you? With the hell we've been going through?' Well good, make it good for something.

When I got married, I was a 'mature' bride. I was reading every book, and wanted a little bit here, a little bit there, just different things you're trying to do. I've been to weddings where they jump the broom, I respect it, but I didn't do it at my wedding.



The Mothers: Loretta Devine (Ms. Taylor) and Angela Bassett in 'Jumping the Broom'
Photo credit: © TriStar Pictures

HollywoodChicago: This story is focused on the family's women, the strong bearing and tradition of the matriarchal influence in all families. What do you love about the strength of the women in this screenplay?

Bassett: That they fight for their families, they love their people. Somethings they're misunderstood, and they misunderstand. They are in it, and they are advocates for their babies and their children.

HollywoodChicago: At one point your character actually notes that in her family lineage they had owned slaves. What makes that proclamation either brave and shocking to you?

Bassett: I don't think I was trying to shock Ms. Taylor. I'm neither proud of it or ashamed of it, it's just an immutable fact. I didn't play it as I sit high and they sit low, because we were slave owners in my family. She just spoke it, and we come from all kind of colors and all kinds of backgrounds.

HollywoodChicago: Gaining wealth in America is about gaining power, creating class rather than race. In your opinion, what are the advantages and backlash of wealth within the delicate balance of interaction in the African American culture?

Bassett: It’s a forward step for the family, but the backlash is that as humans we tend to get too content and comfortable, when ‘we’ve’ made it. When you’re in the struggle together, and you have the common enemy of hunger, you then recognize the humanity in others, we’re going to fight this together. In African American culture, we still have some walls that need to be torn down. We can’t afford to get too comfortable, wealthy, rich and fat...and not stay in the fight.

HollywoodChicago: You portrayed civil rights legend Rosa Parks in a TV biopic. What essence of her human side did you most want to capture in your portrayal and did you meet with Ms. Parks in the research for the role?

Bassett: I met her years before I portrayed her. I met her at a dinner for broadcasters, and had the honor of sitting between her, the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement, and James Brown, the Godfather of Soul. [laughs] I thought I’d died and gone to some sort of heaven. I just remember her being very sweet, talking about the food and acting very politely, like ‘will you watch my spot?’ I thought, how did I even wind up here? She loved young people, believed in them and invested in them. She was decent to the core.



Angela Bassett (Betty Shabazz) and Denzel Washington (Malcolm X)
Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

HollywoodChicago: Both Betty Shabazz and Tina Turner were born within five years of each other and took completely different paths for their journey in American culture. Was there anything similar about those two great women that surprised you in your character research?

Bassett: It was the strength of character, the resilience in both of them, after such incredible crushing pressure, that would have crushed someone else’s spirit, and has crushed many a spirit and life. It didn’t for them.

Betty Shabazz, who saw before her very eyes her husband being murdered, with her children present, and pregnant with another child, if she wants to go insane I can understand how it could happen. But she goes on with her life and without even the luxury of Coretta Scott King, whose husband was revered. But she kept going, one foot in front of the other, until her tragic end.

HollywoodChicago: You had the circumstance of portraying Shabazz twice, correct?

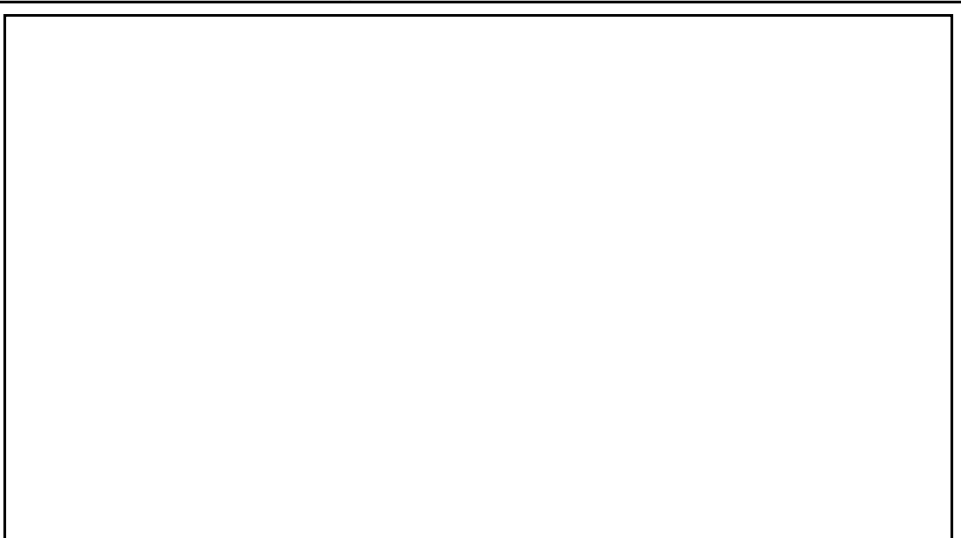
Bassett: Yes.

HollywoodChicago: Did you have an opportunity to meet her? Did she give you any insights to Malcolm X the man?

Bassett: I didn’t meet her until after the first film. And that was a situation where we were just making a movie and it was her actual life. Her own life was special and heart-breaking, and I just wanted to be respectful. Sometimes history as we remember it is different than history as it really was. I was just trying to get a picture of her without trying to invade the events that I thought were still sore, for the sake of making a movie.

HollywoodChicago: What was your feeling about Ike Turner’s strong negative reaction to ‘What’s Love Got to Do with It’?

Bassett: I think his strong reaction was understandable. When I ran into him he was delightful.





Angela Bassett in Chicago, April 12, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago: You met Ike Turner?

Bassett: I ran into one day in Lamerck Park in Los Angeles, and he said ‘hey!’ Of course I paused. And then he said, ‘I’m doing my own film, and I want you to be in it.’ [laughs] I didn’t know how to react, but he had the eye of the tiger, you didn’t sit him back or lay him down. He kept going.

HollywoodChicago: You are entering the comic book realm with a role in the upcoming ‘Green Lantern.’ Which super hero would you most like to emulate and why?

Bassett: [Laughs] I don’t know, I don’t know enough of them....Wonder Woman! That’s it. [laughs] I wonder, but I don’t know.

HollywoodChicago: Finally, as a student of African American studies at Yale, what transitions within the culture did you observe back then that you felt would become most challenging in the future, and did that prediction in your eyes come to pass?

Bassett: As a student, we were protesting to persuade Yale’s divestment of South Africa during apartheid. I was using my talents as an actor to speak at the rallies. I would take poetry and perform it. We kept fighting and rallying and sitting in, and they finally did divest.

Years later I went to Soweto, South Africa, and other townships to demonstrate how to vote. It was just so moving to see men and women, 90 years old and on canes, taking seriously this right to have a voice. To see long and winding lines, it was just amazing.

“Jumping the Broom” opens everywhere on May 6th. Featuring Angela Bassett, Paula Patton, Laz Alonso, Loretta Devine, Mike Epps, Brian Stokes Mitchell and Romeo. Screenplay by Elizabeth Hunter and Arlene Gibbs, directed by Salim Akil. Rated “PG-13”



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