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LUPITA NYONG'O

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OSCAR-
WINNING
ACTOR
**LUPITA
NYONG'O**
ON HER ROLE
MODELS, THE
POWER OF
BLACK PANTHER,
AND WHY
SHE CAN'T
CHOOSE
FAVOURITES
WITH
FASHION.

BY KAYLA A. GREAVES

set in STONE

Lupita Nyong'o is having a busy day on set, but has made time to chat despite her hectic schedule. It's clear to see why so many are inspired by her Superwoman-like work ethic, an admirable trait she says she learned from her father. "[He] is just so faithful to his principles, and sacrifices a lot for the good of his community, our nation," Nyong'o asserts with a clear sense of pride in her voice. "And I saw him work, I saw him just so committed, and that's definitely something I aspire to be. Just hard-working—maybe to a fault."

Since taking Hollywood by storm back in 2013 for her breakthrough role in *12 Years A Slave*—which she was cast for prior to graduating from the Yale School of Drama—Nyong'o's star has been on a steady rise. The awards and accolades she's received for that performance alone, including winning the Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role the following year, is the type of recognition many seasoned actors have only ever strived for. Simply put, there are few people who are destined for this type of greatness, and Nyong'o is certainly one of them.

Though some may look at her prompt success as a bout of luck, the 34-year-old always knew in her heart that acting is what she was meant to do. "It was the dream," she says. "It wouldn't leave me alone. I feel like I had to honour it and try it out." She even remembers the exact moment she realized her true calling. "I was performing for my family and extended family at an event, and I was playing a boy who ate a poisonous egg in the forest and died," Nyong'o shares, laughing softly as she recalls the nostalgic moment. "I remember my mom gasping dramatically at my demise, and I loved that feeling of being able to affect her that way—and that made me want to be an actor."

But it's one thing to have the talent, and quite another to have the motivation to make the dream a reality. Nyong'o had both. Despite the naysayers in Nyong'o's extended family, who suggested she may be better off having an "interest in business and medicine and mathematics"—and also never seeing anyone in her family's hometown of Kisumu, Kenya, make it as a professional actor—her benevolent parents, Peter Anyang' Nyong'o and Dorothy Nyong'o, never discredited their daughter's artistic abilities. "I wouldn't have been able to defy what was expected of me had I not had that kind of support—so I really do thank my parents," she says. "My parents

are phenomenal in that way. Whatever [my siblings and I] showed interest in, they would educate themselves, and avail themselves to those interests.

"[My mother] didn't know what an actor needed but she would find things," Nyong'o continues. "Different clubs, different competitions, poetry competitions, debating. And it was all because of her, you know? She took the time to try and find things that would hone that interest that I had."

Being raised by such a compassionate and understanding woman is perhaps why Nyong'o's endearing humility is so innate, despite her growing stardom. "Her selflessness just astounds me," she says of her mother. "Very humble and well-meaning."

The Academy award-winner's latest film, *Black Panther*, which is set to release in February 2018, already has audiences buzzing online and is poised to be a box office hit. And with an all-star cast including Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan, and film veterans Forest Whitaker and Angela Bassett, who could really argue otherwise?

While audiences have only seen snippets of the film through various released trailers, it's clear that what Marvel is creating with this movie will be nothing short of groundbreaking. Featuring a primarily black cast and the first African-American director in the history of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* has the potential to shatter the cliché narrative of the "traditional" superhero, in terms of appearance and national origin.

"What we have in store for the world is really special," Nyong'o says of the upcoming production. "I think we're seeing a world, an aspirational world, that we haven't seen before, and it's extremely inspiring. It's putting forward a narrative of an African country that is self-determining and that is extremely powerful and advanced." She also predicts that the film will have major societal influence. "I think all too often we really don't have that kind of cultural event—global cultural event with that storyline," she explains. "So I think it's going to be a shift. I think it's

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going to be something that will inform a lot of popular culture going forward."

There have also been reports circulating that Nyong'o will appear in the *Charlie's Angels* reboot alongside Kristen Stewart, as well as a forthcoming performance in *Star Wars: Episode IX*. However, she's keeping mum on the details for now, but says moviegoers should stay tuned.

Earlier this year, Twitter users thought up a plot for a movie starring Nyong'o and Rihanna—all prompted after a photo of the two stars sitting side by side at Miu Miu's 2014 Paris Fashion Week runway show went viral. And to all our luck, *Entertainment Weekly* reported back in May that Netflix has secured a deal for the film project after negotiations during the 2017 Cannes Film Festival.

The actress says she was left inspired by the Internet-driven initiative. "The passion of the public was so palpable and I definitely joined in on the fun online," she says. "But what was so beautiful about that entire phenomenon was the people were speaking up about the kind of work they wanted to see, and it cannot be denied."

The conversation also turned to who would direct and pen the movie. "They didn't just populate who they wanted to see in front of the camera, but they also went as far as to say who they wanted to see behind it," she adds, in reference to Ava DuVernay reportedly being asked to direct and Issa Rae to write the script. "It speaks to the conversations of cultural inclusion and diversity... That is extremely powerful."

Outside of the big screen, Nyong'o has made quite the mark on the fashion industry by appearing on the covers of major magazines like *Vogue*, *InStyle*, *Elle* and *Glamour*, to name a few, and ruling the red carpet in haute couture, whether at the Met Gala or twirling for the cameras in a baby blue Prada gown at the Oscars. Even when she's photographed just out and about, the star somehow always manages to look exquisite. When asked to choose her most memorable look, Nyong'o is just as stumped as the rest of us would be, and jokes that it's "like picking a favourite child."

"Oh man, I could not possibly pick one," she laughs. "I've really enjoyed my introduction to the red-carpet world, and I've had some really fun and memorable moments in the past."

There's no question that Nyong'o has solidified her place in Hollywood as an icon. And much like her parents are to her, Nyong'o is seen as a role model for up-and-comers. Her advice to them? Be certain that acting is your true passion, then be completely devoted to the craft.

"I asked myself the questions, 'Would I be an actor if it did not put food on my table? Would I be an actor if I wasn't making it?' My answers were 'Yes!' One way or another, I still wanted to do it," she shares. "Knowing that made it a lot easier for me to pursue. It's a commitment to your own dream, and nobody else can dream for you."

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