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VANESSA
BELL CALLOWAY

A Lesson on Acting Out

The movie and television actress Vanessa Bell Calloway, who is best known for her roles in *What's Love Got to Do with It* and *Coming to America*, offers her valuable advice on what it takes to break into the acting business.

USTYLEU Mag: What is your secret to longevity and staying power?

Vanessa Bell Calloway: You have to study. I studied continuously, even after I graduated with a bachelor's degree of fine arts. When I'm not in front of the camera doing a movie or a TV show, I find a play to do to keep my instruments sharp. Even with all of my experience, I still work with an acting coach for big roles. You never stop studying.

USTYLEU Mag: What was the big break in your career?

Vanessa Bell Calloway: All My Children was a huge opportunity for me. That show put me on the map and gave me a canvas to act on a regular basis as a character and as part of a unit. I learned that you can never rest on your laurels and say, "Well I got it," because you have to be prepared to find that next gig. For example, I found out I was getting written off the show when I got the script with no prior warning. That is when I made the decision to move to Los Angeles.

USTYLEU Mag: Right after that you moved to Los Angeles. Was that a good move for you?

Vanessa Bell Calloway: Absolutely! I had been in New York for a while and was getting auditions for many feature films. I was always told I was really good but, then they would go to Hollywood and cast the role. When I arrived in L.A., I began to work immediately landing roles in *Days of our Lives*, night time TV and movies. I acquired my work ethics from being in New York, so I got out there and hustled. Back then, we didn't have the technology of today. I sent out hundreds of photos via U.S. Mail like nobody's business. It was a serious business for me, and I approached it that way.

USTYLEU Mag: Tell us about the Iconic role in the hit movie *Coming to America*:

Vanessa Bell Calloway: I originally auditioned for the lead female role. Knowing that I needed longer hair, I went out and bought a cute curly \$30 Michael Weeks "Amani" wig. After auditioning, the casting director said, "I like your hair!" She didn't say anything about my acting, but she just liked my hair. I get a call back to meet the director John Landis, and I wore the same wig because in this business, you use whatever worked the last time. I finished reading for the lead female role for John Landis, and what does he say? "I like your hair. Your hair is great," and again, nothing about my acting. I'm thinking, here we go again with this \$30 wig! Then he says to me, there's this other part of the princess I want you to read for. I'm thinking, "I don't want to read for the princess," but of course, you couldn't tell John Landis "No." I didn't know what an African princess was supposed to sound like, so I had to think on my feet. I made up an accent for the now popular catch phrase "Whatever you like," and John Landis loved it. I get a call back to read with Eddie Murphy, and at the end of that reading, what do they all say? "I like your hair. Your hair is great." I get the job, and hair stylist, Robert Stevenson, brings in these two wigs that I had to wear for the part. I remember thinking, "This is interesting," I wore a \$30 wig named Amani and ended up wearing two wigs to play the role as Princess Amani. It was all about that wig!

USTYLEU Mag: Everyone remembers your small part as Princess Armani more than the lead role. You took that small role and made it iconic.

Vanessa Bell Calloway: At the time, I was not happy that I didn't get the lead part, but I

knew I had to make a huge impact with that little part. You have to make a big impression in whatever role you play in.

USTYLEU Mag: What are you working on now?

Vanessa Bell Calloway: The last three years, I've been doing my One Woman Show in Los Angeles entitled, "LETTERS FROM ZORA." It's a play about writer, Zora Neale Hurston. We played at the Pasadena Playhouse to sold-out shows and outstanding reviews, and in October, we are opening the Fall season at the Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey. You can check out my web site www.vanessabellcalloway.com. You can also catch up on my web series "In the Company of Friends" and my blog talk radio show, "That's So Very Vanessa" at www.InTheCompanyOfFriends.tv.

USTYLEU Mag: What last piece of advice can you offer our readers?

Vanessa Bell Calloway: You have to stay ready to be ready. I tell people to look at themselves. Do you like what you see? Do you like your hair? Do you like your teeth? Things happen so quickly in this business, and if your teeth are jacked up now, they are going to be jacked up in the morning. If you are not happy with your size, now you are going to be the same size in the morning. A good example is the show *Hawthorne* with Jada Pinkett Smith. I had just had a full mastectomy, however, my hair, nails, skin, everything was on point. I received a one-day notice to read for the part on Thursday and had to report on the set on Friday. I never have to get ready because I always stay ready.

USTYLEU Mag: Thank you so much Vanessa. It was such a pleasure to talk to you!