

WHO'S
THAT

Girl?

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KERRY WASHINGTON IS MORE THAN JUST
ANOTHER PRETTY FACE IN HOLLYWOOD. AND WHILE
SHE'S HAPPY TO TALK ABOUT HER LATEST ROLE,
DOMINATING THURSDAY NIGHT TV, OR HER FAVORITE
CHARITY, THE ACTRESS LAYS DOWN THE LAW
WHEN IT COMES TO KEEPING HER PRIVATE LIFE
PRIVATE. NOW WE KNOW WHY.

Kerry

WITH HER HANDS ON HER HIPS AND EYES NARROWED, Kerry Washington is delivering instructions in a firm tone. She is not pleased.

“I don’t have two straight lines here!” says Washington to a number of excited youngsters assembled for a class excursion. “I need two ... straight ... lines.”

Standing in front of the nearly 100 students from Inglewood, Calif.’s, Warren Lane Elementary School, Washington’s booming voice and stern look has transformed her into the quintessential schoolteacher. The usually designer-drenched actress is confidently leading the group wearing a simple dress and sensible pumps. The only thing that gives away her superstar status is her purse: a black crossbody Givenchy bag. Clearly enamored with—and in awe of—their mentor, these kids seem to have little choice but to fall in place.

Washington is no stranger to the children. As part of the Turn-around Arts program, she comes into the school regularly, interacting with the students and introducing them to the arts through field trips and acting classes. On this day, they’re traveling to UCLA to see a live performance of *The Hot Chocolate Nutcracker*, Debbie Allen’s interpretation of the legendary ballet.

“Today is very important,” states Washington, addressing the youngsters. “The performers know that a group of students from Warren Lane will be in the audience, so how you behave matters. Think about what you want them to think of your school? And what do you want them to think of you?”

“We want them to know the kids at our school are respectful,” offers a little girl after raising her hand.

“That the kids at Warren Lane are respectful!” Washington echoes. “Yes! Who else?”

A little boy standing toward the back chimes in. “That the kids at Warren Lane are fantastic.”

“That the kids at Warren Lane are fantastic!” Washington repeats. “Exactly! So will we be on our very best behavior to represent our school?”

“Yes, Ms. Kerry!” the kids ring out in unison. With just a hint of a smile, she leads them into the auditorium for the show.

(PRIVATELY) DRUNK IN LOVE

THERE ARE MANY facets of Kerry Washington, some we know well, and some we don’t know at all. Frankly, the actress can be a reporter’s nightmare—candid to a point, tight-lipped to a fault. At the same time, she drops gems on life and love that are spoken from a place of true grace, wisdom and self-awareness; the kind that she has clearly worked hard to achieve.

One week after the *Hot Chocolate Nutcracker* performance, the version of Washington who filed 100 students in two straight lines in five minutes is nowhere to be found. Now, she is getting all dolled up in a photographer’s studio, prepping for her EBONY cover shoot. Her hair perfectly coiffed and her face made up to understated perfection, Washington slips behind a cordoned-off area and comes out in a drop-dead gorgeous, floor-length gown. She walks toward the photographer, ready for her close-up.

Beyoncé’s “Halo” is pouring through the speakers, and the sentimental lyrics are not working to get her in the right mood for a sultry and sexy photo shoot.

“Can we change up the music in here?” Washington asks. A more upbeat Beyoncé track starts up, and her eyes brighten.

“We be all night,” she sings, her hands in the air, slinking closer to the photographer’s lens. “Druuuunk in loooooove!”

This Kerry Washington is not what one would consider “ratchet,” (though her minitwerk when “Drunk in Love” comes on is impressive). But it’s clear she knows how to let her hair down when she wants to and when she’s comfortable. Her hairstylist, Takisha Drew, is also a close friend and says there’s a lot about “downtime Kerry” that might surprise folks.

“I’ve introduced her to a lot of music,” shares Drew. “Right now, it’s all about “Tuesday,” she explains, referring to the popular track by rappers ILoveMakonnen and Drake about getting rowdy in the clubs midweek. “When we’re working, we’re working, and when we’re not working ... let’s just say we have a great time.”

Washington’s stylist Erin Walsh co-signs on that assessment. “People have no idea how funny and silly Kerry is,” she remarks. “We can sit around and talk about the most inane stuff and just crack ourselves up.”

It must be noted that even “downtime Kerry” is carefully curated. Between takes, Washington is asked outright why she’s always so guarded. There were barely any rumors that the actress was even dating former professional football player Nnamdi Asomugha until they were actually married and their nearly 1-year-old daughter, Isabelle, still hasn’t been seen (except for a glimpse of her feet peeking through a blanket in a few paparazzi shots).

The level of secrecy is hardcore. Is she using some kind of Secret Service Black Ops mission to keep the intimate details of her life under wraps? At this, Washington playfully laughs out loud.

“My husband and I each called our publicists the day after the wedding to let them know it was true, in case they read about it somewhere. And my publicist said, ‘My God, you should work for the White House.’ I said to her, ‘Well, I kinda do!’”

Washington has a bit of a defiant twinkle in her eye when she talks about getting married on her terms and sharing the details on a need-to-know basis. But when pressed on why privacy is so important to her, her smile slowly disappears. She chooses her words carefully, with long pauses, looking up at the ceiling to think about what it is she wants to say.

“At a certain point, I realized that living my relationship in the public eye didn’t work for me anymore and I just stopped,” she explains. “I share a lot about my work, my lifestyle as well as my professional friendships. But I just don’t share things that involve my personal family life—except for details about my dog, Josie. She’s the blurry area.”



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In this day and age, when many celebrities overshare aspects of their home lives through Instagram posts and other forms of social media, this woman is a rarity. While Blue Ivy Carter, North West and other celebrity children are scrutinized and criticized, Washington is rightfully unapologetic about keeping her daughter offline.

"I get it," she says, taking out her phone and waving it around. "I take a jillion pictures of my daughter every day. When she's older she'll probably be all over Instagram, but for now, I just show her pictures to whoever's standing next to me."

And with that, she scrolls through her phone and in a true proud mama moment, shows off recent photos of Isabelle. In one picture, the baby, an exact blend of her parents' best attributes, is smiling brightly, holding a Christmas bow to her head. In case you were wondering, the Isabelle cuteness level is a DEFCON 1.

A RIGHTEOUS MIND

ALTHOUGH you may not see Washington posting her personal business on Front Street, she does not hold her tongue when it comes to her political leanings and what she feels are her civic responsibilities as an American. She has stumped for President Barack Obama his first campaign and is currently a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

Yet her activism goes beyond formal politics. When Ferguson, Mo., teen Michael Brown was killed last year, his funeral coincided with the Emmy Awards. While conducting interviews on the red car-

pet, Washington didn't hesitate to mention that she felt conflicted about being there and not particularly celebratory. "This has been a really complicated day for me," she said to one reporter. "I started the day watching the funeral services. It's a lot to wrap your head around being an African-American in this country right now."

feather in her cap one day? "Politics? Absolutely not," she asserts emphatically. "I wouldn't be able to handle what it takes to get approval in politics. I have a hard enough time dealing with seeking approval in Hollywood."

LIFE'S GREATEST LESSONS

SO WHAT IS NEXT FOR THE 38-YEAR-OLD ACTRESS? Washington gives vague and clipped one-word answers when asked what she's got brewing outside of the current season of her hit ABC drama *Scandal*. After a bit of prodding, she reveals that she has three projects in various stages of development in the works, including one she's producing herself. "I just have to see what lines up with the show's hiatus," says its leading lady. She also hints at doing more fashion, (her *Scandal*-inspired line presented by The Limited was released in 2014). "I didn't think I'd be doing anything in fashion last year, so I'm truly open to whatever happens next."

For now, however, leading the Thursday night ratings powerhouse gets her full attention. "I have a lot of pots on the stove and several plates spinning," explains Washington, "and I'm fully committed to this wonderful job I get to come to every day."

Scandal, which returned for its winter premiere in January, is a choice that at first scared the actress. Not because of the subject matter, but because of the commitment that television demands.

"I remember the first time I met Shonda Rhimes. She told me that a show like *Scandal* could end up being an eight-year relationship,"

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The glamorous star could have easily kept the conversation to the safe topics of her favorite designers. But she didn't, willfully deciding to be unflinchingly honest even though this racially charged case could potentially make others uncomfortable.

"I was really broken that morning," she recalls. "Watching that funeral, I was just broken. And I take all of who I am into a room. That's where my mind was that day. I'm not going to let anyone segment me or make me exclude parts of who I am because they may be threatening."

When asked if she'd like to see more of her Hollywood colleagues take a stand on the social issues that matter most today, she bristles, vigorously shaking her head back and forth.

"Absolutely not. I just feel like I have a responsibility not to let being in the public eye silence me," she shares. "Being a politically active person is who I am and how I was raised. If I weren't Kerry Washington the actor, I'd still have campaigned for President Obama. I may have been knocking on doors instead of speaking at conventions. You do what you can with what you have, and that's our responsibility in life. It's different for different people. You have to do what's right for you."

It leads to an interesting question: Could politics be another

THE MESSAGE

BACK AT UCLA, as the students take their seats in the balcony, "Teacher Kerry" helps the principal do a final head count. Before taking her seat, she turns to offer yet another stern warning.

"Remember, how you behave matters," she notes. "You have control of what people think about you and your school. Is that clear?"

The students nod as they all settle in, ready to watch the show. Washington gives one final (and playful) I'm-watching-you side eye before slowly slinking down into her seat.

How one behaves matters and how others perceive that behavior are in your control. These are the lessons Washington wants her students to know, ones she has clearly used as personal mantras to successfully guide her 20-year career.

Just before the curtains go up and the performance begins, she's asked for three words that encapsulate her current state of mind. Once again, she takes her time to ponder her answer before disclosing an insightful response.

"Grateful," reveals Washington. "Grateful. Curious. And present." ■

Aliya S. King is the entertainment editor at EBONY.