

One-way ride into history

Angela Bassett gets on the bus (up front) as Rosa Parks

By MICHAEL GILTZ

LIKE most people of her generation, 43-year-old actress Angela Bassett can't remember the first time she heard about Rosa Parks.

The Civil Rights heroine was simply an icon, someone that was always present in stories and songs and history. But it wasn't until Bassett began researching Parks's life for the TV movie "Rosa Parks" (airing next Sunday at 9 p.m. on CBS) that Bassett really appreciated her.

"Rosa Parks was radicalized early on by her grandfather and mother and, of course, her husband," says Bassett, who can add Parks to the list of famous real-life women she's portrayed, such as Betty Shabazz in "Malcolm X," Michael Jackson's mom Katherine in "The Jacksons: An American Dream" — and, of course, her fierce, Oscar-nominated performance as Tina Turner in "What's Love Got to Do With It."

"I, like many people, just simply thought of Rosa Parks as a woman who was tired of giving in or tired of standing up and just refused to move that day," Bassett says. "I wasn't aware that she had an altercation with that same driver 12 years previously and had made a conscious decision to never board his bus again."

"She remembered him. He, of course, didn't remember her. But now he's bound to her for the rest of his days and throughout history whether he likes it or not. And I hear he does not like it."

The TV film is the latest project Bassett had a hand in producing. Getting involved in casting and the choice of director lets her work with people like the movie's director Julie Dash, who helmed the 1991 film "Daughters of the Dust."

"Julie Dash is intelligent and sensitive and quite the warrior," says Bassett. "You need all those things when you're working in the television arena. Sometimes the work has to be done so quickly, there's a danger of losing some of the nuances. Those nuances include details of the daily humiliations that blacks faced in the South not so long ago. Beyond the obvious — such as "Whites Only" water fountains and the seating on buses — "Rosa Parks" shows a courtroom where even Bibles are labeled "Whites Only."

In the local department store, black children must bring in traces of their feet to buy new shoes — only white kids are allowed to try them on and only white kids are permitted to put their feet inside an X-ray machine that lets them see how well the shoes fit.

"Now, Julie, who is a little bit older than me, she remembers that," says Bassett.

"She also had a book on scan machines and the fluoroscope machine actually was banned because it was really, really harmful," she laughs. "It was a good thing those kids couldn't put their feet in there. We wanted too, but actually it turned out to be cancer-causing."

Though "Rosa Parks" details the activist side of the woman, the heart of the film is the strain it put on her marriage, with Parks and her husband enduring harassing phone calls, the loss of their jobs and the constant threat of violence.

"It wasn't easy but they did endure."



Rosa Parks (above, being fingerprinted) was more than just a woman tired of giving in to discrimination, says Angela Bassett (right, as the civil rights icon in the CBS-TV movie).

says Bassett, who first met Parks in 1994 at an awards ceremony where she was seated between Parks and James Brown.

"It was a commitment they made before God when they became married. Despite the trials and the sacrifices that their personal life took and their professional life took, they remained committed to each other."

Bassett, of course, is doing much more than enduring. She is flourishing. She recently appeared on stage at the Public in "Macbeth," opposite Alec Baldwin. Her next movie is another film with John Sayles, called "Sunshine State."

But she is still pushing for more — work of the quality she expects still doesn't fall in her lap.

"It's not like I know what I'm doing two years from now," says Bassett. "It's not easy yet, it's still a struggle, but I still have strength."

