

THE TIMES

MAGAZINE

Supplement of the Year

31.01.26

I'VE
HAD TO
DEAL WITH
SEXISM,
RACISM
AND NOW
AGEISM

Why there's no stopping

Halle Berry

**TRAVEL
SPECIAL**

CAITLIN MORAN

Yamas! I've found
my Greek island

GILES COREN

Yikes! My really
wild adventure

PLUS

The most romantic
places to stay
in the world

Halle Berry, 59, photographed
at the Aster hotel in Los
Angeles by Leigh Keily.
Styling: Maryam Malakpour



The Oscar-winning actress Halle Berry has been challenging preconceptions all her life. Now, as well as starring in a new movie, she is taking on a different role – as a champion of older women. Helena de Bertodano meets her

One day, while Halle Berry was shooting her latest movie, *Crime 101*, a fellow actor surprised her with an unscripted line targeting her character's age. "Fifty-three!" he mocks her. "It's not a good number for a woman in this business."

Berry, who plays a high-end insurance broker, chuckles as she recounts the story. "[The director] told the actor to piss me off. They thought they were gonna really shock me by calling me 53, because that should make me feel bad about myself... Afterwards the director asked me if he had gone too far. I was like, 'He actually made me younger than I am.' It didn't matter to me at all."

In any event, he had picked the wrong way to needle her. Berry turns 60 this year and is resolutely unapologetic about her age. "Why do we have to be ashamed of the most natural thing that happens to all of us? I'm not having the problem; society has the problem. They want to put me in a box that says, you are now a certain age; you're no longer as valuable as you used to be. I refuse – refuse – to accept it because I know I'm more valuable now than ever. Wiser, smarter, stronger, better."

Of course, it may be easier to turn 60 if you look like Halle Berry. Or perhaps it is harder if you are known for your beauty. But Berry has gone out of her way to prove that she is far more than the sum of her looks. Quite apart from an extraordinary acting career, often playing gritty, unglamorous roles, she has in recent years become a warrior for women in menopause, tussling with California governor Gavin Newsom over a bill that would expand insurance coverage for menopausal women and launching a health company, Respin, to provide resources for women navigating midlife.

It goes without saying that she doesn't exactly look her age as she walks into the Aster, an exclusive Hollywood hotel, dressed in neon yellow canvas track pants, toe-ring gladiator boots and a black fluffy jumper. She has a broad smile and zero attitude; nothing about the way she carries herself suggests she is an Oscar-winning actress who was once ranked No 1 on People magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People list. "Do you want to sit here so we're next to each other?" she says, patting the pink velvet sofa. Someone brings her a mug of tea. She turns to me: "Would you like some tea too?" Of course, this is just normal, considerate behaviour – but it is not something that comes naturally to many Hollywood celebrities.

On one level *Crime 101* is a beautifully shot, classic crime caper about a gentleman jewel thief, played by Chris Hemsworth. A gentleman because he ensures no one is physically hurt during

his multimillion-dollar heists. But there is a second theme, running just beneath the surface, about women being sidelined in middle age. Berry plays Sharon, who has dedicated her career to the elite insurance company where she works. But while the men are promoted and made partners, she finds herself being marginalised, strung along with empty promises. "She knows she deserves to be a partner and be on the level they are, and she realises that's never gonna happen. They've duped her."

In fact, she is really just being used as bait to attract wealthy clients – and as she ages, she becomes less valuable to the firm. "What initially spoke to me [about the role] is I'm at this phase of my life. It's a privilege to age but it's been so stigmatised, especially for women. If they talked about men's ages too, fair game. But they don't. It stacks the cards against us."

"I don't know how old these male actors are because their age doesn't precede their name. With us, it always does. Soon it will be '60-year-old Halle Berry'."

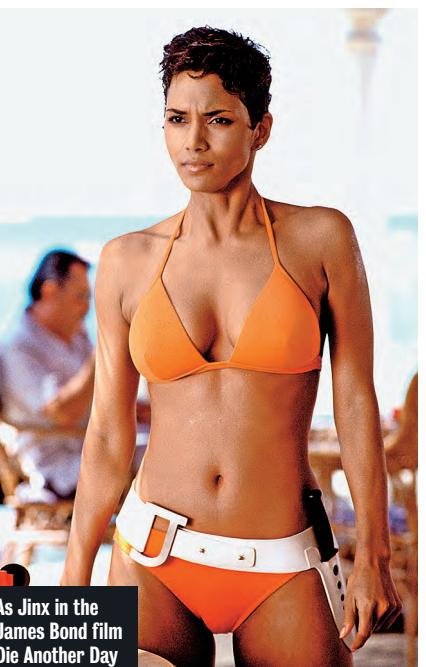
Not that she would dial back the years. "If I had this brain and this wisdom when I was 25, I'd be dangerous... But this comes only with time and age."

At 25, Berry was already quite dangerous. A beauty pageant queen turned actor from Cleveland, Ohio, she was just 24 when she convinced the director Spike Lee to cast her as a crack addict in *Jungle Fever* – a raw role that earned her critical acclaim and ultimately led to her gut-wrenching, Oscar-winning performance a decade later in 2001's *Monster's Ball*, in which she played a young mother whose husband is executed on death row. To this day, she remains the only black woman to win the best actress Academy Award.

Over the course of her almost four-decade career, Berry has acted in romantic comedies, low-budget independent dramas, thrillers and big-budget action films including *X-Men*. She's played victims and villains and even a memorable Bond girl, Jinx, in *Die Another Day*. Berry is the first to admit that a few of her 46 films have been terrible – like the much derided *Catwoman* – but no one questions her ability as an actor. Nor her skills as a stuntwoman. "I was a gymnast as a child. I like to do stunts." In *Bruised*, her 2020 directorial debut, she played a washed-up MMA brawler, and trained as a fighter for two and a half years before embarking on the film. On the second day of shooting, she broke two ribs but kept on filming, terrified that production would be shut down if anyone realised the pain she was in.

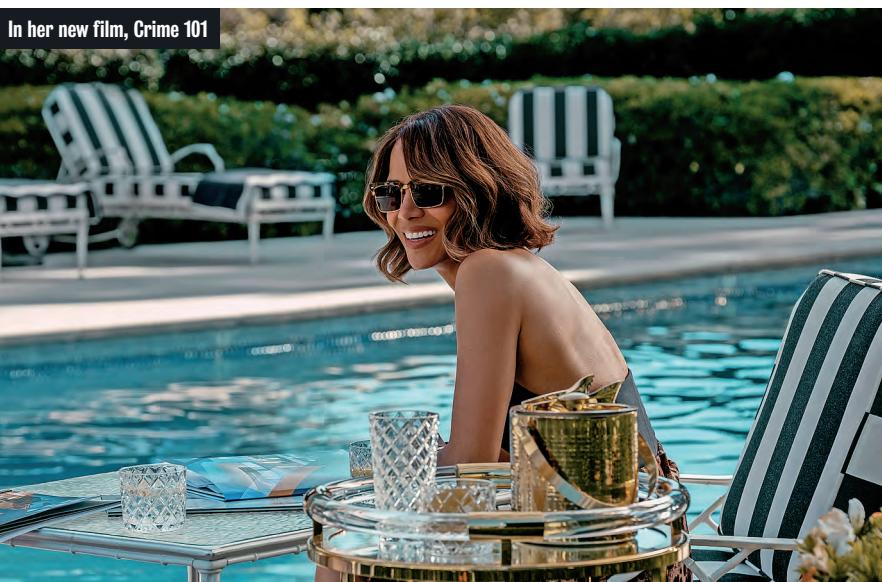
"I kind of gravitate towards dark characters," Berry says. "Characters that are full of strife. Struggle. Have to overcome something." Which is ironic

ALAMY/GETTY IMAGES



as there is a lightness to Berry in person, a sense of fun and warmth. She hugs everyone she meets and her default mode seems to be humour.

Born in 1966 to a white mother from Liverpool and an African-American father – who met, perhaps inauspiciously, on the psychiatric ward at the Cleveland hospital where they worked – Halle was named after the local department



'My life has been charmed, but it's also been fraught with heartbreak'

store, Halle Brothers. Her father was an alcoholic and her parents divorced when she was four. "I saw my father beat up my mother and beat up my [older] sister. And that was terrifying. He never did that with me, largely because I fled. I have a lot of guilt that I let them get beat up and I went and hid in the closet."

Although she stayed alienated from her father, who died in 2003, she now sees him in a softer light. "I always took my mother's side... The one who left gets vilified."

By then a boyfriend had entered her into a beauty pageant and she went on to win Miss Teen All American 1985. The following year she became the first African-American to represent the United States at Miss World, coming sixth. An ambition to act led her to New York, where she was cast in a television sitcom called *Living Dolls*.

From the outside her career may look effortless ("Halle's comet" was the inevitable headline in the early days), but Berry says it has never felt that way. In New York, she lived briefly in a homeless shelter and says that nothing has come to her easily. "Being a black woman, I've got a double whammy against me: sexism and racism. I really do believe that the hierarchy goes: white man, black man, white woman, black woman. Racism is alive and well, and sexism is alive and well, and ageism is still alive and well."

For months, Berry took the abuse. One day, aged 12, she was set upon in an alleyway by a group of classmates. Amid the blows, she crumpled to the ground and her shirt was torn off. "I had little breast buds and no bra on and I felt exposed and humiliated. It was a defining moment in my life. I said, 'I'm not gonna take this any more.'"

She decided to prove herself to them. "I'd had a lot of self-esteem issues, but when I started fighting, I became a f***ing fighter." Instead of using her fists, she

took a different approach. "I was like, 'OK, you guys don't think I belong here? I'm going to show you. Not only do I belong here, I'm going to beat you guys at everything.' I became editor of the paper. I was class president. I was head cheerleader. I was in the marching band. I was on the honour roll. I did everything. Which is why I ended up not going to college: I was exhausted by the time high school was over."

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Tears spring to her eyes when she

remembers seeing her father in the distance at her high-school graduation. Later, driving home, she saw him stumbling down the freeway. "It was like a scene out of a movie. That moment made me realise he did care."

At first the family lived in an all-black neighbourhood, where Berry was teased about her blonde, blue-eyed mother. Later they moved to an all-white neighbourhood, where the school system was better. "My mother was hellbent on us getting a good education. [But] we were in shellshock because we didn't feel like we fitted in... We would get Oreo cookies left in our mailbox and [notes] like, 'N****s, go back.'"

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"Have I had the hardest life? God, no. But has my life been easy? God, no. Have I had highs and lows? Great highs and then great lows."

On a personal level she has struggled too. One boyfriend hit her so hard that

she lost most of her hearing in one ear. She has divorced three times – from baseball player David Justice, singer-songwriter Eric Benét and French actor Olivier Martinez (with whom she has a son, Maceo, 12). She also has a daughter, Nahla, 17, from a relationship with the Canadian model Gabriel Aubry. "I have two children who are beautiful souls and I feel great about that. The relationships with their dads were not meant to be. But those kids were meant to be."

After her last divorce in 2016, she decided to take time out from relationships. "I was solo and celibate for four years. I had to really sit myself down and be alone and grow and reflect and realise my value. I had decided if the right person doesn't come, I will be alone. And that's OK. I'm enough by myself. I've got my children. I have my career. That's more than enough. I have an embarrassment of riches."

So anything more would just be icing on the cake? "Yes," Berry agrees enthusiastically. "And the icing had better be exactly what I want or I'm not going to eat that cake. Because it's too costly."

Then in 2020, during Covid, she was put in touch with the musician Van Hunt. They became friends over text but didn't meet in person for six months. When they did finally get together, their connection was immediate. "I would not have been ready for him before. I had to go through fire and burn to get to the point of appreciating a person like him. I was a moth to a flame. I no longer am that person."

It was shortly after their relationship became physical that Berry realised something was off. Sex became really painful – or, as she memorably put it on stage at the New York Times' DealBook Summit last month, "Sex started to feel like I had razor blades in my vagina."

Today she elaborates, "I finally had this amazing man in my life and that part started to feel right for me. And then I had this problem and I thought, there's something terribly, terribly wrong here."

She went to the doctor, who immediately misdiagnosed her symptoms as a severe case of herpes. Assuming she must have caught the condition from Hunt, they both had tests. His results came back negative first, followed shortly afterwards by hers. "So I said [to the doctor], 'If it's not herpes, then what is it?' He said he didn't know. And that's when I went head-first down this path of self-discovery and reconnaissance for myself."

After days of googling, she figured out she was in menopause. "That was God's joke. That was the universe. I was like, 'Universe, you bring me this man I've been asking for, and now you plummet me into hell.'"

Of course, she knew about menopause in an abstract way. "But I thought

I was going to skip it. That's how ignorant I was." Now it all made sense. She belatedly realised that she had been in perimenopause for years. "I couldn't remember the most basic things. When my daughter was little, I went to get a pizza and I put the pizza on top of the car and I drove all the way home. Luckily, it stayed on my car."

Over the years, the symptoms got worse. "I would be up all night with night sweats. I couldn't sleep. I was raging. I was angry all the time."

What would make her angry? "Everything. What didn't make me angry is the question you should ask. I was just on edge. And I felt alone. I remember being on set and sweating and trying to find ways to excuse myself. Normally I would be the life of the party. [But] I would find myself feeling very sullen and avoiding people."

Since then, she has dedicated herself to spreading the word. "There are 100 symptoms of menopause; we all go through it differently. HRT is a big help, but it's not right for every woman. I've been on HRT now for almost five years and it hasn't solved every issue. I still have hot flashes in the night. I still suffer greatly from brain fog. Everything is dry... It's a new phase of life that requires attention."

Lack of knowledge, Berry explains, means that many relationships founder, with men mystified as to why their partners no longer want to be intimate. "So men go get a shiny car and a young woman. And we just get old."

"We deserve to be still alive at this time of our lives and have sex and be intimate. That's what makes us who we are. Men got the blue pill real quick because men know that their longevity depends on their ability to stay sexually active. Well, the same is true for us."

Her company, Respin, started as a website offering at-home workouts during the pandemic, but now it is targeted at women in menopause, offering members personalised programmes, workshops and expert guidance with plans starting at \$20 (£15) a month. She has also pioneered an intimacy gel with Joylux called Let's Spin, the benefits of which she is evangelical about. On Mother's Day last year, she posted a video of herself on social media, in bed with Hunt, holding the gel and telling viewers, "We're about to give it a spin." Her followers were shocked: "Embarrassing," posted one. Some unfollowed her. One said, "Never knew Halle Berry could be so unhinged."

Berry shrugs. "I really don't care. I think everybody has the right to tell anybody [anything]. I mean, look at our president. You can no longer tell me I can't say what I want to say." It's only

OPENING SPREAD, LEFT: COAT, SAINT LAURENT. JEWELLERY, CARTIER. RIGHT: CLOTHES, VALENTINO. JEWELLERY, CARTIER. HAIR: SINAI CAMPORA FOR KALPANA. MAKE-UP: KARA YOSHIMOTO BUA FOR A-FRAME AGENCY USING CHANEL BEAUTY

'Why do we have to be ashamed of ageing? I'm more valuable now than ever'

by being loud, she says, that anything changes. "No well-behaved woman ever made history."

In her "razor blades" speech last month, she goaded Newsom: "[He] has vetoed our menopause bill, not one, but two years in a row. But that's OK because he's not going to be governor for ever. And with the way he's overlooked women – half the population – by devaluing us in midlife, he probably should not be our next president either. Just saying."

Afterwards, Newsom's office tried to tamp it down, saying that he and Berry were "reconciling" the issue. But Berry says she heard nothing from him. "We tried to set meetings with him. He never got on the phone. So that was not true."

Shortly before we meet, it is reported that Newsom has allocated \$3.4 million from the state's \$350 billion budget "to support health coverage for perimenopause and menopause". "It looks like something is changing," Berry says. "But he still hasn't reached out to me."

She plans to take it further. "I'm going to Washington DC soon to reintroduce the bill on a federal level. You have to just keep your foot on the gas." And she is launching another intimacy gel. "It's called Juicy Like A Peach and it will be packaged beautifully. I want us to have beautiful products that we can sit next to our La Mer on our nightstands."

Given that Berry is happy to discuss the most intimate of topics, it is surprising to hear that she recoils when anyone comments on her looks. "I die a thousand deaths... It becomes a hard compliment to accept. Year after year after year. When you're striving to be more. I've worked really hard as an actor, and still to be reduced to a beautiful face it's like, hey, wait a minute. Come on."

So how does she respond? "I say, 'Thank you.' And I smile. Because you're an asshole if you say anything else."

Of course her co-star in *Crime 101*, Chris Hemsworth, is also often objectified. "He's undeniably a handsome man. Women would come up to him and they're twisting out of their bodies," she says, imitating the effect he has on them. "So I get it. But I don't think he gets asked about it the way I have been asked about beauty my whole career."

In the street, people often tell her she looks just like Halle Berry. "I say, 'I know, I hear that all the time.'" When people do recognise her, they usually say, "You're so pretty." She smiles ruefully. "Or, 'You're prettier than I thought you'd be.'"

On Instagram she has more than nine

million followers whom she keeps updated with pictures of her rescue kittens and menopause tips. Indeed, she was before her time with social media, setting up a website called Hallewood back in 2000, through which she would give fashion and beauty tips and share behind-the-scenes photos and advice. Under "Click here to enter Halle's heart", for example, she told her fans she was looking forward to "more and more love" and "edgy parts that people don't think I would do".

Following the excellent *Crime 101*, she is taking on another edgy part – as a woman who, after decades of marriage, escapes to Paris and reinvents herself as an elite escort. The movie, *Fleur*, is about to start shooting in France under her own production company, HalleHolly. "I relate to a woman who made that choice, putting everybody before herself, and now what's left for her?"

But she makes clear that she herself chose a different path. "I kept my career while I had kids and it was a juggling act. I missed big moments with them. But I've also been the breadwinner of my family... So I've had to take care of all of us and sometimes I've been resentful of that. But at the same time I'm grateful I held on to my career because when they're gone, I'm still gonna have me."

Unlike her own childhood, which was largely unsupervised – "We were latchkey kids" – Berry keeps a close eye on her children. "My daughter still isn't on social media. There are many things she's not allowed to do. When she's 18 in a month, she'll get to make all these choices for herself. And I hope she'll make wise ones. But I felt it was my job up until 18 to control that."

Looking back on her life so far, she says there is nothing she would change. The hardscrabble childhood forged her. "That has kept my feet on the ground. I've been at a crossroads where I could have been a true Hollywood story [ie have gone off the rails]. There are many times when I could have gone down a path that would have been sheer destruction for me. But I wasn't willing to sell my soul to the devil to be successful."

She is the first to acknowledge how much she has changed over the years. Gone are her people-pleasing days of the past. "No longer am I that dancing bear. And it's liberating... The fact that I've survived so many things makes me feel good. It allows me to sit here today and to say I have zero f***s left to give." ■

Crime 101 is in cinemas on February 13