



# WASHINGTON IN THE SPOTLIGHT

*When does Kerry Washington, BA '98, shine?  
The moment she becomes someone else.*

BY JAIME CIAVARRA | She was a music legend's wife, a sharp-witted attorney, and a teenage mother. She suffered the wrath of a Ugandan dictator and unsuccessfully seduced Chris Rock. She shoplifted. She battled an aggressive neighbor. On stage, she quite literally croaked.

In the 11 years since award-winning actress Kerry Washington graduated from GW, the Bronx, N.Y., native has transformed herself again and again.

"Being an actor," says Washington, BA '98, "is about telling a story. When you really become a character, the audience feels as if they are experiencing truth."

The actress best known for her roles in *Ray*, *The Last King of Scotland*, and the *Fantastic Four* films took a few days last fall to share her Hollywood wisdom with fans, friends, and the Colonial community during GW's Alumni Weekend, where she was honored with the 2008 Recent Alumni Achievement Award. Her thriller *Lakewood Terrace* was the No. 1 movie in America when Washington sat down with *GW Magazine* to reflect on how the University influenced her personal and professional lives.

Like many undergraduates, Washington came to GW with a passion: to learn about and understand the world around her. Although she took center stage in community productions as a kid, Washington, the only child of a university professor mom and a mortgage broker dad, didn't want to limit herself to drama. She passed up chances to attend renowned theater conservatories such as the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and the Carnegie Mellon School of Drama because GW offered a unique





NICOLA GOODEN/UNIVERSAL PICTURES

**Washington was propelled into the mainstream media limelight after playing opposite Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles' wife, Della Beah Robinson, in the 2004 film *Ray*. "I don't have a favorite role," Washington says. "It's like asking somebody who their favorite kid is. They are all different."**

opportunity—she was awarded a hefty acting scholarship, but she didn't have to major in acting.

"I knew I wanted to go somewhere I would have access to a broad spectrum of learning, where I wouldn't be told that I could only be either a thinker or a creative person," says Washington, 32. "If you look at the Renaissance period, Michelangelo knew that in order to paint the human body, you have to study biology and physiology, and I think the same is true for acting. If I am asked to embody and portray the human condition, I'm never going to be able to do that unless I have a background in the artistic and social sciences.

"If your job is to represent the world," she explains, "you have to know about the world."

So Washington, a presidential performing arts scholar, created her own personalized major. While she took some acting classes, most of her coursework at GW focused on anthropology, sociology, and psychology, subjects that she says gave her the ability to analyze, critique, and understand human behavior. That's why, when the lights in the movie theater dim, the actress Kerry Washington seems to disappear as her characters come to life, says Alan Wade, GW professor of theater.

"Over time, Kerry has developed an absolute devotion to the 'truth of the moment,'" says Wade, who taught and directed Washington at GW and now follows her career. "The medium of film is different than theater. Film can cause an audience to become aware of whether there is truth or not. In film, it's about coming closer and closer and closer to character."

Over the years, Washington's roles have run the gamut. She has been in comedies, such as *I Think I Love My Wife*, teen movies like *Save the Last Dance*, and action flicks, including *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* and *Fantastic Four*. She's landed spots on TV, starred in independent films, and emerged as a formidable force in big-budget blockbusters. For Washington, the magic is in the script.

"When I read it, the character has to live in me already. I don't mean that the experience of this one person is within my life experience, but that something about the character resonates with me," Washington says. "As I evolve and grow, physically, psychologically, and emotionally, I am also drawn to different characters and stories. I'm sure that 10 years from now, I'll be moved to be a part of different projects than I was 10 years ago."

While her career has been steady for the past decade, it was her portrayal of Ray Charles' wife, Della Beah Robinson, in the 2004 film *Ray*, and as Kay Amin in 2006's historical drama *The Last King of Scotland*, that propelled Washington into the mainstream media limelight. GW Professor of Theater Leslie Jacobson, who first met Washington when she auditioned for her GW scholarship, says that her steady rise to fame is indicative of the type of person Washington has become.

"Kerry balances her career well. She's been out 10 years and is moving to the A-list," says Jacobson, one of Washington's closest teachers and mentors at GW. "I think that is because she cares about the larger role artists should play in an informed society."

Washington chooses parts that allow her to expand on her talent, Jacobson says. As a presidential performing arts scholar, Washington was required to audition for every GW production. Jacobson recalls Washington nailing the leading part of Cassandra, the last frog on Earth, for an original ecological musical called *Croak*. Washington says she spent hours at the National Zoo observing amphibian behavior for the role.

"I remember being struck by how she just delved into a character that never existed before. She had to embody human qualities and nonhuman qualities about the destruction of life on our planet. That's not an easy task," Jacobson says. While her acting skills always excelled, Washington's ability to see the larger artistic and political role of the



**An award-winning actress and champion of the arts, Washington was honored with a 2008 Recent Alumni Achievement Award from GW last fall. Here she speaks about her career during an Alumni Weekend event at Betts Marvin Theatre.**

JULIE WOODFORD

craft set her apart from the pack, Jacobson says.

"She was often interested in things that had significance in society beyond the enjoyment of the show," Jacobson explains. "She was always aware of the power that the arts can have."

That power has influenced Washington to take action. At GW, she worked with the local theater community and also created Shades of the Fine Arts, a support system for people of color in the arts. Today Washington is on the board of The Creative Coalition, a social and political advocacy organization of the entertainment industry, and she works with other nonprofit groups to increase arts funding and education. When the 2007 writer strike provided a window of free time, Washington hit the campaign trail and stumped for presidential candidate Barack Obama. Always a politically-minded person, Washington says she felt at home in, well, Washington.

"My politics and my social activism are deeply rooted in who I am as a person," says Washington, who takes issue with the notion that celebrities and politics shouldn't mix.

"I'm offended when people tell me I don't have a right to articulate my social beliefs because of what I do for a living. But I'm careful to always say that I speak out as an American, as a woman, as a New Yorker, as a person of color, as a professional, as a member of a union, as a human being. All of these things factor into my ability to have a voice."

While being in the nation's capital was an attractive aspect of GW, Washington says she knew she wanted to be a Colonial when she saw the unique scope of students walking around campus. She considered 16 other colleges.

"The sense of diversity on this campus was so inclusive because it wasn't just the diversity of the United States, it was literally the diversity of the world," she says. "At GW, I felt like there was no limit to the world that you lived in or to the people that you might interact with."



JESSICA MCCONNELL

## KERRY WASHINGTON, UNSCRIPTED

After a photo shoot at GW's Jack Morton Auditorium, Kerry Washington, wearing a buff suit and killer high heels, shares some of the little known facts about her college days and career.

**GW Magazine:** Tell us about your campus experience. Where did you live freshman year?

**Kerry:** I lived in Riverside Towers (now called International House), and my roommate and I were the only two freshmen in the building. During my junior year, I was a RA in Thurston. (Laughing) So I did have a Thurston experience, but I experienced it on the other side.

**GW Magazine:** You didn't major in acting at GW. What would you do if you weren't an actress?

**Kerry:** I thought maybe I would go into law or psychology, maybe psychiatry. I figured I love acting, so I'll minor in acting; I'll just do it for fun.

**GW Magazine:** Speaking of law, you played an attorney on *Boston Legal*...

**Kerry:** Yeah, and the props department made my degree from GW Law. I called them about it, and they had no idea why I was so excited. They just thought it was funny because it was Washington and Washington.

**GW Magazine:** You've been in show business for a decade now. What inspires you as an actress?

**Kerry:** I love my job, and there is nothing like the feeling when I'm doing my job well. It inspires me in itself—the excitement and the fear and how much of the world I learn about through it.

END—FADE TO BLACK

And no limit, she adds, to the person you might become. Washington says GW professors and fellow students pushed her out of her comfort zone, which ultimately influenced her career path and the type of actress she is today.

"I have a lot of respect for acting and for the dramatic arts and for film and theater, and much of that was cultivated here," Washington says. "I was taught to push past those safe spaces of an artist and to go bravely into uncharted territories. GW was that safe nest where I could break free with all of the mother hawks around."

"Now I gravitate toward those things," she says, "because I find it is where I create my best work—when I've been pushed to the edge." **GW**