

Uzo Aduba

**MOST**

**WANTED**

Uzo Aduba is undoubtedly the breakout star of *Orange Is The New Black*. Stylist meets the astonishing woman behind *Crazy Eyes*

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## Uzo Aduba

The air in the studio in New York's East Village is ringing with a rich operatic voice. The song is *O Mio Babbino Caro*, a soprano aria from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, and it is loud. It's coming from the lungs of Uzo Aduba, the actress who plays – or, more accurately, *inhabits* – the role of fan favourite Suzanne 'Crazy Eyes' Warren in prison comedy-drama *Orange Is The New Black*. And she's got a habit of performing in public. "I have to temper myself," laughs Aduba (a trained opera singer) as she breaks off from her song. "If I have my headphones on, I'll be walking down the street and suddenly burst into... 'Oh baby give me one more chance!! I get some looks.'"

As scene-stealing Suzanne (Crazy Eyes), 33-year-old Aduba is one of the most compelling characters on *OITNB* – the Netflix powerhouse which tells the true story of Piper Kerman, a privileged white woman who finds herself in a federal woman's prison after trafficking drugs for her girlfriend. The show has garnered cult status among its millions of viewers and turned orange boiler suits into a legitimate fancy dress costume. Suzanne, a vulnerable-yet-menacing, mentally unstable but ultimately well-meaning inmate has found her way into viewers' hearts with her eccentric acts: pursuing 'prison wife' Piper – played by Taylor Schilling – with impressive gusto in season one (at one point she even 'marks her territory' by urinating in her cubicle); turning violent to do the bidding of matriarch 'Vee' in season two, and dabbling in erotic alien fan fiction in upcoming season three (on screens 12 June).

Hers is a tour-de-force performance that has cemented her as one of the most impressive actors on TV right now. Aduba is just as entertaining throughout *Stylist's* shoot. Interviewing her is almost like being in the front row of a one-person show. She is fiercely intelligent, thoughtful but engaged; mimicking accents – she often adopts her mother's Nigerian intonation with comic effect – snapping her fingers and roaring with laughter. There are mannerisms that she shares with Suzanne, too. To emphasise a point she smacks her hand down on the table, and then smooths out a circle with her palm – a move her character often employs for comically dramatic effect on the show. "I have elements of her in me," Aduba admits, "like how she perceives relationships and how



YOU LOOKING AT ME? ADUBA'S EXPRESSIVE FACE WAS ONE OF THE REASONS SHE WAS CAST AS CRAZY EYES

she can open herself emotionally. I'm not as intense a lover – I'm definitely not going around peeing on people and beating up best friends for love – but I have known love that deeply. I know what it feels like to put all of yourself into it and come out empty handed."

Physically however, she couldn't be further from Suzanne's masculine swagger and bantu knots. But there is one giveaway similarity. When she laughs (which is often), she reveals that unmistakable gap in her teeth wide enough to whistle through. In fact, the show's creator Jenji Kohan has said that she hired Aduba specifically because she had an interesting face. "I'd much rather be described as interesting than beautiful," Aduba nods when I ask her about it. "But I don't think the two things need to be mutually exclusive. There's something intriguing about difference."

Having overcome sensitivity about her appearance – she spent her childhood smiling with a closed mouth for photos and used a fake tooth piece to fill the gap at early auditions – she cites women who weren't 'run-of-the-mill' as her main inspiration. "I was always drawn to people like Meryl Streep, Barbra Streisand, Glenn Close and Whoopi Goldberg – what they were doing was amazing, but they didn't look like anybody else." It is Oprah, however, who was her real driving force. As a teenager she would write to her and was thrilled one day to receive a reply signed in her unmistakable purple



CRAZY EYES AND LORNA MORELLO (Yael Stone) GET CRAFTY FOR VALENTINE'S DAY

sharpie. "She filled my mind with limitless possibility," she says. "It's where my power to dream comes from." Now Aduba is one of the most critically acclaimed actors of the moment, winning a 2015 Screen Actors Guild Award and a Primetime Emmy. Not bad for someone who struggled to fit in as a child, growing up as the only Nigerian family in her hometown of Medfield, Massachusetts.

### SUPPORTING CAST

Even as a youngster Aduba had a knack for over-achieving. She attended countless after-school

**"I HAVE ELEMENTS OF HER IN ME, BUT I'M NOT GOING AROUND PEEING ON PEOPLE"**

clubs – figure skating, amateur dramatics, athletics (she's still sporty and recently ran the Boston and New York marathons). She gets it from her mother who was born in Nigeria and overcame polio (having been told she would be a 'cripple' for life) to become a tennis champion. She also lived through the Igbo genocide during the Nigerian civil war in 1966 – where tens of thousands of southern Nigerians were

massacred – and was later widowed in her 30s. Eventually she moved to the US, remarried and gave birth to a girl, Uzo (now one of five siblings). "My mum has lived a life that I don't even know if nine people could live," Aduba says. "I know the sacrifices that were made here [in America] and overseas for me and my siblings to be gifted the opportunity to live in this country and to have been exposed to the things that we were exposed to growing up. I would never want to be so foolish as to take it for granted. There was a lot of blood and sweat and tears shed for me to even have the choice to be an artist."

Aduba's full name, Uzoamaka, is of Igbo origin, and means 'the road is good' – although she used to plead with her mother to allow her to change it, arguing that people found it impossible to pronounce. Her mother refused, saying, "If they can learn to say Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky, they can learn to say your name." Ever her daughter's biggest fan (she accompanied her to the Emmys where they both met Oprah), Aduba's mother was supportive of her when

she attended theatre school in Boston, and when she moved to New York (where she is still based) to pursue theatre roles. Aduba did indeed find success on stage, making her Broadway debut in 2007 in *Coram Boy*, a musical about two orphans rescued from an African slave ship.

Her first TV appearance, however, was as a nurse in US police drama *Blue Bloods*, after her manager suggested she start auditioning for screen roles. "It wasn't until she suggested it that I realised I hadn't done it before

because I had been afraid to," she admits. "I was very aware that I was 'interesting', but I didn't see a lot of 'interesting' on film and TV." The roles didn't come easily. "I was constantly reading scripts, going to auditions then getting told, 'No thank you,' 'Coming close' or, 'You're interesting but not quite right.' All I heard was 'No' for days and weeks on end." Eventually, the pressure got so much that



→ she pledged to quit acting. "I was auditioning for a role that I didn't know if I really wanted," she says. "I ended up being sent the wrong directions and was 30 minutes late. The audition went well but I told myself, 'You are not going to get the part because you were so late. The universe is telling you that acting is not for you.' I was in tears on the train home and told myself, 'That's it – I quit.' Then I got back to my apartment and 45 minutes later got a phone call saying I had got *Orange*."

### AN ON-SCREEN PHENOMENON

Of course it's impossible to tell Aduba's story without talking about the show that has made 'Crazy Eyes' a household name. So wide-ranging is *Orange Is The New Black's* appeal, Barack Obama has referenced it in a political speech, it has received 12 primetime Emmy nominations and the show has already been renewed for a fourth season, before the third has even started. And its success is down, in no small part, to the cast's willingness to immerse themselves *entirely* in their roles – as god-fearing meth addicts, relapsed nuns, infatuated stalkers and ailing bank-robbers. When Aduba talks about the show, she refers to the two 'Is': 'I, Uzo', and 'I, Suzanne.' It's almost as if she is so dedicated to her character, that Suzanne has found a way under her skin to become a part of her. "I love her," she nods. "I feel a deep, deep responsibility for her; like I am one of her only caretakers. I don't want anything to harm her." I wonder, then, given that she feels so closely aligned to Suzanne, if she ever feels let down by her actions? After all, this is a woman who threatens to "cut" fellow inmates, gets into violent altercations and who constantly radiates a sense of being *just*

## "THE SHOW HAS CHANGED THE WAY WE LOOK AT TV AND THE WAY WE LOOK AT PEOPLE"

about to topple over the edge (in pre-production notes Suzanne was described as being 'innocent like a child, except children aren't scary'). "No," she says, after contemplating the question. "No villain thinks they're a bad person. I realise that even with her violence, it's always from a place of love for something. Suzanne is someone who lives her entire life as a 10. She gets p\*ssed at a 10, she is happy at a 10, she hurts

at a 10, everything about her is physicalised." I press her on a particularly violent scene from season two where Suzanne, under orders from her prison 'mother' Vee, brutally attacks her friend Poussey (played by Samira Wiley). "That was a hard day," she concedes. "I, Uzo, felt so bad. I think Suzanne did too. There is a lot of laughing and a lot of

singing at *Orange*, but that was a very quiet day at work."

It's a close-knit community on set. Aduba describes her closest friends including Dascha Polanko (Dayanara), Danielle Brooks (Taystee) and Taylor Schilling (Piper) as her 'tribe'. They text frequently and spend a lot of time off-set together (she's in the process of planning a holiday with Schilling). "We all came into this new – either never

having acted before, or having never been on TV," says Aduba. "So for everyone it was kind of like the first day of school. This trial by fire we went through has made us stick to each other like glue."

The show is also blazing a trail for diversity on screen (diluting what Aduba describes as a "cavernous lack" of ethnic variety). It's responsible for bringing challenging issues such as domestic violence, mental health, addiction and the transgender community into the general consciousness, too. "It has changed the way we look at television and the way we look at people," she says. Indeed, one of the show's biggest success stories is Laverne Cox, the transgender actress and activist who plays hairdresser Sophia, an inmate battling to win the approval of her son. Last year, Cox appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine – alongside an article titled, 'The Transgender Tipping Point' – and in April this year she

appeared on *Out Magazine's* prestigious Power List. "It's amazing because she has done it with a gentle and educational heart and done it with dignity; she is not anybody's toy," says Aduba about Cox's rise to fame. "People have become more interested in a conversation on what it is to be trans. They have never really understood what the 'T' is in LGBT and now you're meeting a person who is intelligent, attractive and who has something to say. You can't brush her aside."

It is arguably also people like Cox who have paved the way for Caitlyn Jenner's very public transition. "It's good that he's being so public about his decision," says Aduba [speaking before Caitlyn's *Vanity Fair* cover was released]. "What makes Bruce Jenner powerful is that he is entirely relatable; nobody in the world does not know who Bruce Jenner is. He was the symbol of masculinity but he has approached

ADUBA IS ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS *OITNB* HAS BECOME "THE BIGGEST SHOW NOT ON TV"



## Uzo Aduba

→ things with such a dignified, open heart, and I don't think we can ever deny honesty. I feel like Bruce Jenner might change the world."

Ultimately though, Aduba is most proud of *OITNB*'s capacity to provoke conversations and challenge perceptions. "The show has stoked the fire inside of me in terms of how we treat things like mental health in this country," she says. "It has shone a light on those who are left uncared for and how they can fall through the cracks in the system and wind up in places like Litchfield (*OITNB*'s prison). Surely there is a better system. The majority of women in prison are incarcerated because of addiction; by putting them behind bars we aren't necessarily treating the illness." She hopes we might soon start to think differently about the type of women who can end up behind bars. "Jenji's ability to focus in on the humanity of these women has forced a lens to be opened up on what it is we are talking about when we talk about



RECEIVING HER PRIMETIME EMMY FOR OUTSTANDING GUEST ACTRESS IN A COMEDY SERIES

the incarcerated," she says. "We are actually talking about mothers, daughters, neighbours, business owners, wives and grandmothers. These are people who have lives that *matter* – sometimes good people can make mistakes."

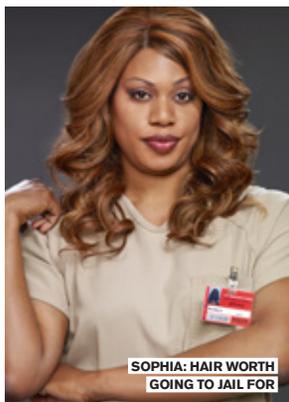
As the shoot comes to a close, I get the feeling that *Orange Is The New Black* is just the beginning for Aduba, a captivating polymath of an actor with a talent for belting out impromptu opera. Her first film *Pearly Gates* was released in the US in April but it can't be long until she crops up in a gritty Lee Daniels drama or sprawling epic. But what does the future hold? "I feel this aching to do more singing," she says, looking pensive. "I'm open; I never know where the road is going to take me." Something tells us it'll be one hell of a journey.



Season three of *Orange Is The New Black* starts 12 June on Netflix

# BEHIND THE SCENES OF *OITNB*

*Stylist* visited the set to talk exclusively to Litchfield's inmates about prison contraband, hair dye and being unlikely role models



SOPHIA: HAIR WORTH GOING TO JAIL FOR

## LAVERNE COX

Plays: Sophia Burset  
(offence: credit card fraud)

### Why do you think audiences are so drawn to Sophia?

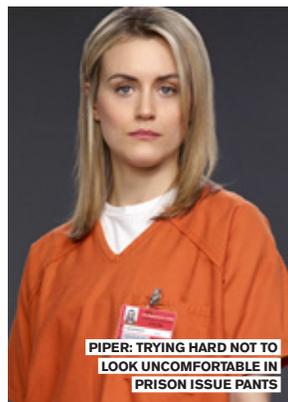
I have to credit our brilliant writers for that. They have written a character that is so deeply and profoundly human that people are seeing themselves in her. I think people can identify with Sophia's struggle. Let's see if that continues in season three – I always wonder if the audience will turn on Sophia.

### How do you feel about the role being a breakthrough for the transgender community?

Before this show, I would walk down the street and people would say awful things to me because I'm trans, or they'd mis-gender me; I was sort of used to being treated like that. Now there is all this love and admiration and respect – it's incredible. In a wider sense there are more transgender characters on TV and that's fantastic. I always believe in multiplying our stories in the media so we can get a sense of diversity out there. Shows like *Transparent*, *Jane The Virgin* and *Sense8* are all doing that. I don't know if I want to take any credit for it though – sometimes it's just about good timing.

### If you could be any other character on the show, who would you be?

Crazy Eyes, she is just so well written. But I wouldn't want to impersonate Uzo because she is incredible. I mean, that's why she won the Emmy.



PIPER: TRYING HARD NOT TO LOOK UNCOMFORTABLE IN PRISON ISSUE PANTS

## TAYLOR SCHILLING

Plays: Piper Chapman  
(offence: criminal conspiracy)

### What's in store for Piper in season three?

Season two was a lot of negotiating with the new parts of herself that she wasn't completely comfortable with; this season she is having fun, she is a little more in charge.

### Does it feel claustrophobic filming in a prison?

As soon as you step on set you can feel that it is true to life. I've visited women's prisons and I was taken aback at how similar it feels. You have a sense of being enclosed and the alchemy inside of you shifts once you come on set. There is an intensity to it, a sadness.

### How has your life changed since being on the show?

I started this show when I was 28; that is a lot of life to live being quite anonymous. Now, everywhere I go, everyone is excited about the show. Just recently I was in a little car rental place with my friend and everyone in there wanted to talk about the show. It blew my mind. I guess this is a successful show; I guess people watch it.

### If you could play any other character who would it be?

Red. It would be fun to play someone who has lived so much of life and has actually come to some conclusions.

### What would you smuggle into prison?

Non-prison issue underwear. It is uncomfortable and not fun.



RED: DO NOT ASK HER IF SHE DYES HER HAIR

## KATE MULGREW

Plays: Galina 'Red' Reznikov  
(offence: mafia affiliation)

### What is the key behind *OITNB*'s success?

The fact that it is woman-to-woman. What I am doing in prison is what you might do if you were in prison, and it's freed from the Hollywood standards of beauty. I can't watch Kerry Washington on TV, because *nobody* looks like that. These women look real, but that's the beauty of it.

### What do you like most about Red?

I've always played nice girls – captains, lawyers, doctors. I have never played bad, somebody who really f\*\*ked up. So when I saw the first season I was delighted. The old Kate was gone, Red set me free.

### How did you feel about dyeing your hair for the role?

That had to be done. Jenji said, "The others get to wear wigs but Red *has* to be red. And not just red, we are going eggplant." I had long, beautiful chestnut hair when I took this job. Then I went to meet Jenji, said, "I'm so glad to be here," and she said, "Cut it."

### Do you get any weird fan mail?

All the time, and it's always about cooking. People say, "How did you make that chicken kiev in episode four?"

### If you could play any other character on the show, who would it be?

Pennsatucky. I could watch Taryn Manning all day long.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARTIN SCHOELLER; GUY FEATURES MAKE-UP: JANICE KINJO FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS MANAGEMENT USING ARMANI BEAUTY HAIR: VANESSA HESHIMA SIMS FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS MANAGEMENT USING LEONOR GREY NAILS: BARBARA MOTNICK FOR EXCLUSIVE ARTISTS MANAGEMENT USING ESSIE FASHION: SOPHIA KARVELA AT THE WALL GROUP UZO WEARS: SWEATER: PRADA, AVAILABLE AT BARNETS NEW YORK