

Vest by Balmain; jeans  
by J Brand; earrings by  
Maria Black; belt by  
Lanvin

# The INTERVIEW: Danai Gurira

*From battling zombies on screen to fighting for women's rights, the actress and writer is a force to be reckoned with, finds TIFFANY BAKKER*

*Photographs by ANNABEL MEHRAN  
Styling by KATIE LONG*

**D**anai Gurira believes that she only really understood the power of Angelina Jolie when she witnessed “Nobel laureates and serious people” clamoring to get a photo of the actress and humanitarian at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, earlier this year in London.

“I just kind of stood back, amazed. These very serious people stopped everything and ran to take photos of Angelina,” smiles Gurira, who was asked to participate in the event based on the strength of her self-penned 2009 play *Eclipsed*, which



## STYLE RÉSUMÉ

**PROFESSION:** Actress and playwright

**MY STYLE:** Chic with touches of originality

**GO-TO LABELS:** I'm open to whatever works on me, but I like the label Suno. It taps into something that feeds me as an African woman, but also feels very fashion-forward  
**BEAUTY ESSENTIAL:** MAC foundation blends beautifully and suits my skin

focuses on sexual violence against women in war-torn Liberia.

“[Angelina] has such spirit and grace,” says Gurira. “She is a very powerful role model of what you do with that level of fame – how you should channel it and pivot it towards something we should all be focusing on. She is rare.”

Gurira, too, is rare. In the world of television and film, perspective is often reflected inwardly, but the 36-year-old Zimbabwean-American actress and playwright’s perspective is resolutely outward.

For example, she currently spends seven months a year in Atlanta shooting US TV phenomenon *The Walking Dead*, in which she plays “bad-ass” warrior Michonne, slicing up as many zombies as she can swing her multiple swords at. That may seem inward, but for Gurira, the parallels between the themes on the show and the civil unrest within her home continent are palpable. “It’s metaphorical. There are so many things that you could put in place of the zombies,” the 36-year-old reflects. “It asks the questions: who

are we, what is the extent of our humanity, and how will we respond? Even my father, who is a 73-year-old chemistry professor, admits he’s sucked in by it. He says to me, ‘It’s not about the zombies, it’s about the people!’ And that’s what makes it such a hit.”

**T**he daughter of Zimbabwean academics, Gurira was born in Iowa but moved to Zimbabwe at the age of five, when her parents returned to the country after studying in the US. “It was an idyllic childhood, I became comfortable very quickly in Zimbabwe,” she says. “I found it to be a very exciting place, very kid-friendly. I grew up around a lot of other university brats, whose parents were academics, and a lot of kids whose parents had decided

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*“I wanted to TELL the STORIES of people who could have an IMPACT, but are NEVER heard”*

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Dress by Isa Arfen;  
boots by Alexander  
Wang; earrings by  
Lanvin; cuff by Aurélie  
Bidermann



to return [to Zimbabwe], so we'd all been born somewhere else."

While Gurira took an interest in drama in high school (she says seeing Ntozake Shange's seminal 1975 play *For Colored Girls* "changed her life"), she expected to follow the same path as her parents into academia, and she returned to the US aged 19 to study psychology. But spending a semester studying in South Africa completely changed her perspective. "I had never been able to go to South Africa when I was growing up because it had been under apartheid. But going there as a young adult and hearing all the voices of the people, it became clear to me that I wanted to tell African women's stories," Gurira recalls. "I didn't want to tell my story. I wanted to tell the stories of people who have experiences, and whose voices could have a magnificent global impact, but who are never heard. And I don't think anyone can justify the reasons why [they're never heard]."

She felt compelled to write roles for women of color, who had long

been underrepresented on stage and screen. "To see that type of ability thwarted by lack of opportunity, it's just reprehensible," she states. "Inexcusable." So, in 2005, when Gurira attended New York University's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts, she co-wrote and starred in *In The Continuum* with her friend and classmate Nikkole Salter. The play, which is about two women living with HIV (one in Los Angeles, the other in Zimbabwe), garnered reams of positive critical attention and an Off-Broadway Theater Award. "[The recognition was] astounding, really humbling," says Gurira. "It made me feel that maybe, just maybe, I'm doing something right."

**H**er "next frontier" is to bring those sorts of roles to the big screen, and Gurira notes that the success of her friend, American/Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o, is evidence that audiences want to see diversity in appearance and storytelling. She contends that the

## DANAI's go-to pieces



Balmain



Eres

"I LIKE BLAZERS that are structured but sexy."



Maison Martin Margiela

"THIS SHIRT IS the perfect combination of elegance and practicality."



Haider Ackermann



Altuzarra



"EVERY WOMAN needs a pair of good black stilettos."

Lucy Choi London



Coat by Michael Kors; sweater by Marni

Oscar winner has helped change perceptions, particularly on how Hollywood defines beauty. "For as long as I've known [Lupita], she and I have been confident girls," says Gurira, insisting that Nyong'o being crowned *People* magazine's 'most beautiful' person earlier this year

indicates a cultural shift. "Has the magazine ever featured a woman that looks so essentially African on the cover before? I doubt it. It should have been happening like this all along, but it's better late than never. There is a lot of ground breaking happening right now," she adds, "and it is ground that has long needed to be broken."