



## alfre woodard

Having just unpacked her bags at Wisteria Lane, Emmy- and Golden Globe-winning actress Alfre Woodard is bound to shake things up when she returns as a cast member to ABC's prime-time hit *Desperate Housewives* on September 25. Throughout her decades-long career, the Oklahoma native has consistently delivered honest performances, from *Miss Evers' Boys* to *Beauty Shop*. Armed with grace and humility, Woodard, 52, diligently wages the good fight for equality across continents through her work with Artists for a New South Africa (ansafrika.org), which she cofounded in 1989. Fiery and passionate, she remains true to her art, her husband, her two kids, her people and herself.

**I hadn't watched *Desperate Housewives* when I was invited to join the cast**, but once I saw a few episodes, I was hooked. There's probably a little bit of each of those women inside all of us, so we're able to laugh at their exaggerated shortcomings. The show is salacious and campy and makes you wonder what sorts of devilish things were going on behind closed doors in those perfect households of the 1950's and 1960's, like *Father Knows Best*. My character, Betty Applewhite, is a conservative woman with a past, and she's just friendly enough—that's all I know.

**After appearing in just two episodes of the show**, I've come into an arena where my fans poke me. I'm not talking about just a tap, tap, "Excuse me," I'm talking about grown folks jabbing their fingers in your rib. I'm thinking, *Didn't your mama tell you not to touch people you don't know, especially when it hurts?* I am a colored woman, over 50, from the South and I've started poking right back!

**When I started my career**, and to a certain extent still today, nobody waited for Black women to go on hiatus so they could do their movie, play or miniseries. The progress that is being made on-screen is that we are allowed to be as mediocre as everybody else—that's true equality. [laughs] We were inventing and creating even during slavery, so something as small as an executive who isn't intelligent enough to hire people of color according to their ability will not keep our best and brightest from shining. You could lock us all in a trunk at the bottom of the ocean, and Morgan, Denzel and Regina would find a way to rise.

**I'm active with Artists for a New South Africa.** Our efforts resonate across financial and cultural spectra because people recognize that a healthy, successful South Africa means a healthy, successful Africa. Our backbone is those who give \$5 and \$25 donations. Sam Jackson and LaTanya Richardson helped secure the premiere of *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* as a benefit; we raised a million dollars. Carlos and Deborah Santana donated the entire net proceeds from the U.S. *Shaman* tour, about \$2.5 million.

**Being alive is about refining our relationships** with family, friends and even people we can't get along with. Our real work is learning to love and making the constant effort to perfect it until we take our last breath. I think I'm too young to have a legacy, but my hope for my two children is that they choose their partners and their life's work based on what brings them joy. I want them to live consciously... freely. □

AS TOLD TO REGINA R. ROBERTSON

# SAID