

GO WITH THE FLO

Florence Kasumba has made a big impact with her fighting skills as much as her acting talent. But, as she tells **Jane Cornwell**, she cut her teeth as a triple threat in stage musicals.



With a single line, Florence Kasumba walked onto the set of superhero blockbuster *Captain America: Civil War* and stole an entire scene. Who could forget the impact made by this statuesque beauty with the shaved pate, cut-glass cheekbones and take-no-prisoners glare, when she confronts Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow for simply standing in the king's way?

"Move," she orders, as Chadwick Boseman's King T'Challa, aka Black Panther, looks on, bemused. "Or you will be moved."

Fans of the 2016 Marvel movie lit up the internet. Who, they asked, was this impeccably dressed bodyguard, credited simply as Security Chief? Was she a member of the Dora Milaje, the squad of elite warrior women who protect Wakanda, the fictional African nation appearing in several

Marvel comic books? Would she therefore assume a larger role in the long-awaited flick *Black Panther*?

And how did Florence Kasumba — who is Ugandan/German — acquire such heroic screen presence?

"That line certainly caused a stir," laughs the married mother-of-two, sitting at home in Charlottenburg, an upmarket area in the west of Berlin. It's a warm day; birdsong is tumbling through an open window.

Florence, 41, is back from training at her favourite martial-arts dojo, practicing bad-ass skills that, more than ever, help keep her grounded. But while the buzz around her is growing louder, the attention she gets from fans, she says, is inevitably good-natured.

"People will say the line ["Move, or you will be moved"] to me when I'm walking along Kurfürstendamm" — a nearby fashion-forward shopping



street, Berlin's answer to the Champs-Élysées – “but it always comes with a big smile, and always makes me laugh. It shows me that people love what I did in the movie.”

Not just that movie. While she's been a familiar presence on German stage and screen since the mid-2000s, Florence reinforced her international next-big-thing reputation by playing Senator Acantha, an Amazonian politician, in 2017's feminist opus

Wonder Woman, and reprising her security-chief role in director Ryan Coogler's barrier-breaking box office smash *Black Panther*. This time around she had a name, Ayo, and – as a core member of the aforementioned Dora Milaje – a narrative arc. Alongside actors Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira, she showed off her acting and fighting skills, very often at the same time, striking a blow for women of colour along the way.

“This is an amazing time to be an actress,” says Florence, a nurse's daughter who was born in Kampala, Uganda, during the years of Idi Amin's dictatorship, grew up in Essen in West Germany, and studied acting, singing and dancing in Holland.

“More women are speaking out and showing their strength and all sorts of possibilities are opening up. When I was filming *Black Panther*, for example, I really had this sense of ‘Wow, my look is finally okay.’ No one is wanting me to wear a wig because it makes me less intimidating” – she keeps her hair cropped out of choice – “as this was what was required to play the character.”

Berlin, of course, is a long way from Hollywood, where social media campaigns such as #OscarsSoWhite have forced directors and producers to revisit the issue of representation of diversity on screen.

Black Panther's nearly all-black cast is unprecedented for a big “tent pole” movie (her fellow cast members, *Hobbit* actors Martin Freeman and Andy Serkis, have joked that they're the “Tolkien white guys”).

While Florence fully embraces the responsibility that comes with being a black female role model, she points out that her experiences have been vastly different to those of her African-American colleagues.

“But I'm so grateful that women of colour, that all women, are being

offered roles that previously we weren't allowed to play,” says this rising global star, whose cruel but fabulous Wicked Witch of the East – a wind-blown vision in flowing red gown and black-feathered cape – was a highlight of the 2017 US TV series *Emerald City*. She also briefly popped up again as Ayo in *Avengers: Infinity War*, currently in cinemas in Australia; if there's a *Black Panther II*, and there probably will be, Ayo may even get a plotline and backstory of her own.

“I've just been in Budapest filming a German TV series [the long-running *Alarm Für Cobra 11*] where I play an FBI agent,” she adds. “It was a role originally written for a man, but they thought, ‘Oh, Florence could do this, she knows how to fight.’ This sort of thing makes me very happy.”

Fluent in three languages, Florence can do sweet as well as scary, funny as well as feisty. She can perform her own stunts and she can sing and dance. Forthcoming roles will show off her range, from Hippolyta in a modernist retelling of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by British director Sacha Bennett, to voicing the hyena Shenzi in Disney's live-action version of *The Lion King*, out in 2019, alongside Beyoncé, Seth Rogen and Donald Glover.

With this latter role, Florence has come full circle. Musicals are where she cut her teeth, and in many ways where her heart still belongs.

It was seeing Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express* as a 12-year-old (possibly in Bochum, near Essen, where the smash musical has run since it opened in 1988), that made her want to be an actor. And not just any actor but a well-rounded one; as a teenager she played tenor sax in a marching band, and sang along to the 1992 soundtrack of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, whose all-Australian cast included Kate Ceberano and John Farnham.

“Since then I've always noticed how many Australian performers are in musicals, and how talented they always are,” says Florence, whose German stage musical credits include virtually every classic production going: *West Side Story*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Evita*, *Cats*, *Chicago*, *Chess*, and indeed, Shenzi in *The Lion King* (for which she auditioned four days after giving birth).

She played the title role in the German version of the Elton John musical *Aida* and the key role of Lisa in her home country's production of *Mamma Mia*. All that simultaneous fighting, moving and acting she does in *Black Panther*? Musicals made such multitasking second nature.

“What matters to me is the character and the script,” she says. “For me the main difference between musicals and film is the preparation. You can rehearse for up to three months before a musical's premiere; on film shoots you meet on the set, discuss what you're going to do and then film it.”

“With *Black Panther*, however, we were shooting for five months. Not just going in and acting. There was a lot of training.”

“Me and Lupita and Danai would show up at eight in the morning and start running and crawling on stuff and rolling on top of each other. And though it was hard, being in the trenches together made us like family.”

“Then there was the story we were telling,” she continues. “Knowing that you are making something people haven't seen before has a big impact on you as an actor. On the other hand, who doesn't love a superhero? Who hasn't dreamed, as a child, of saving the world as a superhero?”

Florence had us at “Move”. Right now her superpowers feel limitless. •