

**BIO PICK**

# Fantastic Journey

Inspiration can come from unlikely places. Yetide Badaki decided she wanted to act while watching *Quantum Leap* in her family's living room in Nigeria. She recalls that, seeing Scott Bakula assume different identities in the 1990s cult sci-fi series, "I had a huge recognition of a human being's skill to do what he did, which was to step into someone else's shoes every week and bring their story to life. I wanted to do that."

Now she does just that, portraying a character who has traveled through time in ways Bakula's Sam Beckett could never have imagined. On the Starz fantasy drama *American Gods*, she plays Bilquis, a half-human, half-demon goddess of love who craves in the modern world the worship she received long ago, when she was the Queen of Sheba.

Fans caught a glimpse of Bilquis's prowess during a graphic sexual encounter in the first episode, when she consumed a stranger to maintain her relevance as a deity. In fact, Badaki auditioned for the series by reading for that very scene. "I focused on her as a goddess feeling out of time and place and trying to feel a connection," she explains.

A self-described bookworm and sci-fi geek who first read Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* novel when it came out in 2001, Badaki says, "I don't consider myself a sexy woman. I really had to investigate her." She drew on her experiences as an immigrant: she and her family moved between England and Nigeria before landing in the U.S. when she was twelve. "I understand coming to a new country and trying to discover who you are," she adds. "That similarity was my touchpoint."

The journey wasn't easy. While studying environmental science at McGill University in Montreal, she says she had to decide: "Am I going to do the thing that was expected? Or am I going to follow my heart?" Badaki chose the latter and headed to New York City with no money in her pockets. Eventually she was accepted into the theater program at Illinois State University, where she earned her MFA. She didn't land her first paid gig until 2004, as an understudy in Chicago theater.

With season two of *American Gods* now completed and season three on order, Badaki is working on a few feature-length independent films. TV viewers may also have spotted her as no-nonsense Nigerian immigrant Chichi on NBC's *This Is Us*.

The actress still sees herself as a dreamer from Nigeria at heart. "In an episode of *Masters of Sex*, this incredible woman says to another incredible woman, 'You're always that twelve-year-old.' That line resonated so strongly," Badaki says. "I'm still that girl wishing and hoping." —Mara Reinstein

*American Gods* is available on demand and on the Starz app.



MATT SAVILES