



MONEY, POWER & RESPECT

TARAJI P. HENSON'S FIRECRACKER ROLE AS COOKIE ON *EMPIRE* HAS BROUGHT HER A FLOOD OF NEW FANS. AS SHE MOVES THROUGH HER NEWFOUND FAME, THE EMMY-NOMINATED ACTRESS REFLECTS ON HER STOP-AND-GO MOMENTS IN HOLLYWOOD AND WHY HER CURRENT TV REIGN IS RIGHT ON TIME

BY ADRIENNE SAMUELS GIBBS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS LEUPOLD | STYLING BY JASON REMBERT



BABY, YOU CAN DRIVE MY CAR
Opening spread: Taraji wears a Lanvin coat and belt, Lorraine Schwartz black cushion and white diamond ring and Vera Wang Collection booties.

This page: On Taraji: a Mugler dress and Lorraine Schwartz black diamond mesh necklace and cuff.

Opposite page: She wears a Naeem Khan silk faille cape and sequin jumpsuit, Lorraine Schwartz earrings and Giuseppe Zanotti heels.

BEAUTY NOTE
 Keep a fierce kisser like Taraji's with Dior Addict Fluid Stick in Whisper Beige.

Every photoshoot has a boob moment. When it happens, some lose composure. Others lean in. Taraji P. Henson, apparently, is a leaner. When Chicago's signature breeze swoops down on her while she poses before a Dauphin helicopter at a swanky helipad, the star welcomes the wind. She chastely pulls the fabric of the Valentino tulle dress close, and as an L train rumbles by, she runs to the photographer. Taraji wants to see the "moment." The untouched image will likely never appear in a magazine but it's pure art paired with amazingly beautiful cleavage illuminated by the setting sun. She quickly contemplates the photo as her team huddles. Then, the moment is gone. It's time to finish the shoot. Taraji hustles back to her mark, hollers "We 'bout to lose the sun. Let's finish the shots. Oh, by the way, titty bop is hot!"

That's how it is with Taraji. She's Hollywood yet gully. She's petite yet makes up for it with a big voice and an even bigger personality. With her 'hood-to-riches backstory, she's proof that the American Dream can become reality. Plus, only Taraji can put on a Mugler body-conscious dress, strut out to the black-and-white Maserati sitting on set, take a handful of smoky-sexy pictures and have nearly everyone forget that she's still rocking the white slippers she took from the "Chump," er Trump, Hotel. (Her words, obviously.)

That's why we like her. She's not only a classically trained actor with Oscar and Emmy nominations under her belt, but she's also like the rest of us (or at least like one of our cousins): a single mother of a college-age son, graduate of a historically Black university, a kick-ass spades player and a blue crab devotee. We identify with her—and all her characters. Yvette. Shug. Queenie. That's why we're excited the world is having a Taraji moment.

Now they—and we—know her as Cookie Lyon, the beast-mo mama bear of *Empire*. And, due in part to the global success of Cookie and her show, Black TV is popular again. Taraji has covered *W* and *Glamour*, and been featured on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. We're not mad, but bless their hearts, our sweet homegirl has officially been Columbused. As Taraji said last April as host of *Saturday Night Live*: "White people finally know who I am!"

About damn time. "Let's keep it real," says Jussie Smollett, who portrays Cookie's son Jamal on *Empire*. "Honestly you're just discovering her?" Taraji has been a leading lady since the beginning. She's never turned out a performance that was less than captivating. It's just all cultures and all races and everybody

is being hip to her now because this is such a broad project." The forever D.C. girl takes it all in stride. "I'm just gonna keep amassing an audience," says Taraji, her voice hoarse yet happily tired after a weekend celebrating her forty-fifth birthday and prepping for an Apple Music commercial and a Hulu ad. "Everything was strategically planned. This is what all my efforts are for."

By the way, she wants those "efforts" to move us all beyond Black and White TV. She hopes *Empire* and her performance in it will motivate entertainment's bigwigs to stick with what works as opposed to what's pop. "Remember when it was *Martin* and a couple shows on the UPN network and all of sudden they went away and now it's all The CW?" she asks. "What I hope they get this time is that it's not Black or White. It's just good material."

And that's why Cookie is a keeper. She's a dynamic character based upon real-life people Taraji knows. And Taraji is so good at being Cookie that even her old movies are resurfacing.

"Even though people are just now finding me as Cookie, thank God for Netflix because people are so moved by my performance they're like, 'Where has she been?' " she says. "I've always said I want to do the type of work that people study."

Serious Business

Taraji is an actor's actor. She went to school for it. From Constantin Stanislavski to Sanford Meisner, she studied the various masters with their different methods. She's had several acting coaches even outside of her Howard University (HU) school of drama training. Yet former HU professor and current acting coach to >



“Everything was strategically planned. This is what all my efforts are for.”

“I was always good and had personality and could make people laugh but my coaches would force me to go deeper.”

many stars, Vera Katz, remembers Taraji as a student with expressive eyes and raw talent. Katz talks a lot about how Taraji acts without talking; how with a flicker of her eyes and set of her jaws, she can influence an entire scene. The professor, like most true acting teachers, taught students to dig deeper, to consider “the moment before”—an acting term that asks the performer to truly believe that an event actually, really happened as opposed to simply reading the event off a sheet of paper.

“I hate to see actors who dry cry or actors who don’t use props,” Taraji says, giving a mini acting lesson and a peek into how Cookie comes to life. “Nothing bugs me more than that. Most humans don’t want you to see them cry, so if anything, you’re fighting the tears. That’s where you get people in the gut... I was always good and had personality and could make people laugh but my coaches would force me to go deeper. ‘What did that person say to you? Where is your moment before? Where are you coming from when you come to the door?’”

Ticking off a long list of coaches she’s worked with, Taraji even flirts with the idea of creating an acting school. While she talks her voice creaks with exhaustion, but her intonation rises as she discusses what young thespians need the most.

“You know how Debbie Allen has her dance academy? We don’t have that anymore. The Meisner technique? We don’t have [a focus on] that anymore. These kids are thinking they can do reality TV and come and do this craft that I studied, sweated and grinded. People forget it’s a craft because it’s so pop now. [The whole] it’s so fun to play so and so in a movie because they have so many followers on Twitter... F that. Can they make me believe the words coming out their mouth?”

One young actor is paying attention, costar Bryshere “Yazz” Gray. “I used to watch Taraji all the time as a kid,” he says between takes on the show’s massive West Side of Chicago set. “She acts just like my real mama. [She and Terrence] are the best acting coaches to have. I’m learning from them daily.”

Empire cocreator Lee Daniels says he closed auditions after Taraji came to the scene (“It was a wrap”) and he has witnessed firsthand how the younger actors observe her. Her performance is so strong, he’s considering a Cookie spin-off in a few years.

“Taraji came in with that cheap fur coat on, some heels and a \$2 dress she must have picked up off the rack in Harlem somewhere,” says Daniels, remembering the audition. “I couldn’t believe it. She’s over-the-top. She’s able to go into the places of discomfort that most actresses wouldn’t go. Cookie was finding her class and Taraji had no problem doing it.”

The *Empire* crew is working 18-hour days to push out an increased number of episodes this season (not to mention the pressure of staying America’s number one-watched show). But those back-to-back days, plus her red-hot celebrity requests, take everything out of her. Taraji has worked so hard that she had to check into the hospital this past summer for exhaustion.

She’s obviously recovered, but she wouldn’t have had it any other way. To help keep things in balance, she recently completed a 21-day raw cleanse. Even for the *ESSENCE* shoot, she kicked it off with a chunky green juice that made her pucker. Taraji chugged it straight down and somehow managed to ignore the Harold’s fried chicken, catfish and fries that sat on set for the rest of the staff. She hasn’t lost weight on the cleanse, but has lost inches—which is nice given that her designer of choice for the moment is Alexander Wang, who dressed her for the Emmys.

She’s so into the clean eating thing that she might give up chicken. Chicken! Wait. Hold fast. She rephrases lest someone tweet a picture of her gnawing on a bone. “If,” she says cautiously, “one day I get the urge to go to Popeyes and get me a two-piece with a biscuit, I’m going to do it.”

That Moment Before

Prior to becoming an A-lister, Taraji was a college student with a baby. She’s faced her share of troubles, like the murder of her son’s father. It was her own dad who encouraged her to move west and since arriving in Hollywood, Taraji’s never looked back.

“Time has gone by so fast,” she says. “I have a grown son. Most of my friends are just getting started. I’m like, ‘Girl, talk to me when he’s a teenager’ and ‘Girl, been there and done that.’” But her doctor did bring up the topic of having more babies in the near future. She vetoed that suggestion.

“At 45, What I’m a do? That baby would come out looking like Benjamin Button! He said I had a lot of eggs left. He was all happy like he was giving me good news. He was like, ‘Do you want to have any more? You have plenty of eggs.’ I said, ‘Do you want them because I’m done. Done.’ I’m not starting over with a grown son. I couldn’t imagine doing it at this age. My career wouldn’t allow for it.”

Before *Empire*, Taraji’s last megahit was 2008’s *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. That’s when she was nominated for an Oscar. At the time everyone said the Brad Pitt flick would boost her career to the stratosphere. It didn’t.

And it was cool. There were lots of independent films, TV shows and some theater. She killed it as the female lead on CBS’ *Person of Interest*. Things clearly worked out anyway. “I’m satisfied with this path because I was clear,” she says. “I didn’t compare myself to people. People said, ‘This is gonna change everything for you.’ I’m glad I didn’t believe that hype. I never got caught up in that stuff. I just stayed the course and worked hard and every role I did, I put my everything into it.” Taraji continues:

“Everything that I did got me here, and I wouldn’t change it or trade it for the world.” □



Adrienne Samuels Gibbs (@adriennewrites) is an award-winning, Chicago-based writer. She’s written for *Ebony*, *The Boston Herald* and *Miami Herald*.



TOP FLIGHT
On Taraji: Salvatore Ferragamo ribbed wool cape and dress; Lorraine Schwartz earrings and Christian Louboutin pumps.

Hair, Cesar Ramirez for Mizani/crowdmgmt.com; **Makeup**, Ashunta Sheriff using Dior Beauty/ken barboza.com; **Manicure**, Ericka Johnson.

For clothing details, see Where to Buy.