

THERE'S
SOMETHING
ABOUT...

TARAJI

We've loved Taraji P. Henson since 2001's *Baby Boy*, and *Tinseltown* has finally caught the fever. But our D.C. homegirl isn't letting it go to her head. Her star-making movie turns aside, she still rolls like your best girlfriend—and that's only part of her magic
BY JEANNINE AMBER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY YU TSAI

There she is, draped in an off-the-shoulder designer dress the color of a fiery sunset. She faces away from the camera, then slowly turns her head, lips parted, heavy-lidded eyes staring directly into the flash, a pose of pure elegance. The photographer, stylist, publicist and assorted assistants inhale in unison and then fill the studio with a chorus of "Gorgeous, gorgeous, gor-geeeee-ous!" Taraji P. Henson, the source of their delight, begins to giggle. "I got a cramp in my leg!" she cries. Such is the charm of Taraji: Even at the height of glamour she still seems like one of us. It's as if your homegirl whispered in your ear, "Watch this!" and then took off to become a Hollywood princess.

Last year Taraji earned the rare distinction of Academy Award nominee for her role as the irrepressible Queenie in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. This year she appears in a string of flicks featuring everyone from Steve Carell and Tina Fey in April's *Date Night* to Jackie Chan in the long-anticipated remake of *The Karate Kid*, out this month. And sitting in a Manhattan hotel suite one spring afternoon, she can't stop grinning over her latest piece of good fortune: She's been tagged to costar alongside Tom Hanks in the upcoming *Larry Crowne*. The comedy, directed by Hanks, also features Julia Roberts. Stars don't soar much higher than this.

Henson, who despite her fame still shops at Target and eats at Subway, credits her family with laying the foundation that keeps her ego from spiraling up into the stratosphere. Her mother, a department store operations manager, taught Taraji resilience of spirit. "I watched my mother get robbed twice on the streets of south D.C., where we lived, when I was a child," Taraji, 39, recalls. "The first time was at gunpoint when I was 6 years old. The second time >



Taraji P. Henson was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE, March 19, 2010, in New York City.

there's something about taraji

the guy grabbed her head and punched her in the eye. Afterward I watched her sit at the table and pull out chunks of her hair. Still she never said, 'I hope that bastard dies.' She never speaks badly about anybody, even people who wrong her. She is just love." Taraji pauses. "Sometimes she'll tell me I get my strength from my father, and I'm like, 'Would you please look in the mirror.'"

Henson's eyes fill with tears when she talks about her father, a Vietnam vet who passed away in 2006 from liver cancer. From him she received another gift: an affirmation that the challenging career path she has chosen was indeed her destiny. "My father was always very in tune," Taraji says. "He would speak things into my life and he'd always be right." Shortly before her father, a metal fabricator, died, Taraji visited him in the hospital. She was buzzing about the critical acclaim surrounding *Hustle & Flow*, in which she starred opposite her good friend Terrence Howard. "And my father just looked at me like, *You're not telling me nothing; I saw all of this for you*," she recalls. "Just before he passed he stared off into the distance and told me, 'You're going to be a sensation.'"

While her mother taught Taraji open-hearted love and her father gave her certainty in her purpose, Henson credits her son, Marcell, now 16, with giving her life balance. "I can't go home and think about Hollywood every day," she says. "He doesn't know about all that." With Marcell it's homework, home-cooked meals, long talks and settling in on Sunday to watch the game. (Taraji split from her son's father when the boy was an infant.)

The actress, who's rumored to have been romantically linked with rapper Common and actor Hill Harper in the past, admits she would like a "lifetime partner." Still she approaches relationships with caution: She doesn't want Marcell to have to deal with any fallout. "I haven't had a date in years," she says. "I can't date this one and that one and have stuff all in the tabloids, because how is my son going to respect women if he doesn't respect his own mother? Be clear: I could have a man—I could have two if I really wanted—but I don't date

just to date. And I'm not looking because when I look I find mess. I'm just waiting for God to reveal The One to me."

We love Taraji for this real girl talk, the way she can curl up on a sofa, brush the hair out of her eyes, and lean forward like she's gonna share a secret. But it's the public Taraji—her boisterous laugh, bedroom eyes and extraordinary ability to infuse every character she plays with depth and vulnerability beyond what the script might have called for—that's propelling her to first-name-only stardom.

Yet Taraji admits that being a Black woman in Hollywood means that people often want to put you in a box and slap a label on it. After critical acclaim for a spate of set-in-the-hood dramas, her label might have easily read, "Plays the downtrodden Black woman." Indeed, soon after *Baby Boy*, Taraji's breakout role in which she portrayed a struggling single mom in South Central Los Angeles, she started getting "all the baby mama, ghetto Betty scripts," she says. "Then, after the success of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, I got offered another mama role. It's like, *I just did that! I don't want to be typecast. I want to challenge myself*."

What she refuses to do is lament the situation or compare herself with other actors and ponder their success: "I could ask myself, *Am I making the same amount of money as other girls?* The answer is, I don't know, probably not. And White girls? No, absolutely not. But I can't harp on the bad things, because when you start comparing yourself to other people it just slows you down. I'm such an optimist; I'm trying to change things. I'm a character actress, but I want to do comedy or play Diana Ross in a biopic or be a superhero and hang from wires and stuff." She pauses, reflecting on the state of her industry and the opportunities available to African-American actresses in Hollywood. "I'm trying to show that, yes, Black women are bankable," she says. "Yes, we are versatile—just as versatile as the White girls," she adds with a wide, confident grin. "Just give us a shot. You'll see."

With Hollywood bigwigs finally calling her name, it won't be long before the rest of the world recognizes what we've known all along: There's something special about Taraji. □

Jeannine Amber is ESSENCE's senior writer. She interviewed Jill Scott for last month's cover story.

SCENE STEALER!



As Yvette in *Baby Boy*, Taraji tells it like it is to Tyrese Gibson.



Playing Shug in *Hustle & Flow*, Taraji gets her turn at the mic.



Henson's role as Queenie in *Benjamin Button* earned her an Oscar nod.



Taraji plays mom to Jaden Smith in *The Karate Kid* remake.

OPENING PAGE: STYLIST, WOURI VICE FOR EPIPHANY ARTIST GROUP; HAIR, URSULA STEPHEN FOR MOTIONS/EPHANY ARTIST GROUP; MAKEUP, TYRON MACHALISEN ART DEPARTMENT, MANICURIST, DIDAY/BROWNPRO.COM. THIS PAGE FROM TOP: THE KOBAL COLLECTION/REED ELI; COLUMBIA; MTV/COURTESY OF NEAL PETERS COLLECTION; THE KOBAL COLLECTION/PARAMOUNT PICTURES/WARNER BROS.; JASIN BOLAND, OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP: JUSTIN STEPHENS/CORBIS OUTLINE; DAVID YELLEN/CORBIS OUTLINE; MARK LIDDELL/ICON INTERNATIONAL; JONATHAN SKOW/CORBIS OUTLINE; KWAKU ALISTON/CORBIS OUTLINE; BOBBY BANK/WIREIMAGE.



"I stay above the mess," Taraji says. "I'm human and I have days when I'm like, 'Ugh!' but I like to stay in my happy place."

& THE MEN SAY...

TERRENCE HOWARD "Taraji is the quintessential Black woman: beautiful, extremely talented, smart and fearless. She's one of the strongest women I know. She was pregnant when she was at Howard University and still handled her business, while starring in a play. That's the kind of strong woman she is." —costar, *Hustle & Flow*



COMMON "My first impression of Taraji after seeing *Hustle & Flow* was, *This woman is incredible!* Her performance was powerful and I was feeling her. Then I had the pleasure of working with her for my *Testify* video. Immediately she felt like one of my buddies—she's that likable." —costar, *Smokin' Aces* and *Date Night*



TYRESE GIBSON "Besides being one of the most talented actresses in the game, Taraji represents the soul of a woman. Women can see themselves in her. She is relatable, tangible—they identify with her strength. Yet she could be any man's homey-lover-friend, who he can have pillow fights with." —costar, *Baby Boy*



ADAM RODRIGUEZ "Taraji's most genuine and sexiest qualities are one and the same for me: She is naturally comfortable in who she is. That clear understanding of who she is is what you see in her work on-screen and when you meet her face-to-face. She's real." —costar, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*



MORRIS CHESTNUT "When Taraji enters and leaves a room, her presence is felt. I admire her talent, commitment and passion for her work. She's a dedicated actress and has the chops to make any scene appear effortless. I can respect and honor that." —costar, *Not Easily Broken*



ANTHONY ANDERSON "Taraji and I go back to when we were Howard University students. Her commitment to character, willingness to be vulnerable and passion are all part of her power. Women love her 'cause she's every woman, and men love her 'cause she's ride-or-die but still a lady." —costar, *Hustle & Flow*

