

The One to Watch

Homegrown talent **Taraji P. Henson** recently shared marqueees with Don Cheadle and Jeremy Piven. And soon she'll be seen emoting opposite Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett and James Spader, making her the **breakout star of the year**.

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY



As Shug, with actor Terrence Howard, in *Hustle and Flow*.

“Baby, you’re gonna win the Oscar!”

So said Taraji P. Henson’s father back in the late ’70s, when his daughter was a dramatic firecracker of a young girl living in the District’s southeast side, divvying her time between her two parents, who split up when she was 2.

“I believed him,” she says now, some 30 years later from her home in Los Angeles, “because he was my father, he remained very much in my life, and he insisted it would happen. He told me all the time that I was meant to be an actress.”

While the coveted gold statuette still eludes this triple threat, Henson, 37, continues to believe that Daddy knows best. And with a name like Taraji, why wouldn’t she continue to dream of acceptance speeches? (It translates into “hope” in Swahili. Her middle name, Penda, means “love” in the same language. And, yes, it was her father who researched her symbolic moniker.)

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The native Washingtonian is no stranger to Hollywood's famed Kodak Theatre, however. In 2005, when she first blazed onto the nation's radar in the indie pic *Hustle & Flow* playing Shug, the hooker with the heartbreaking set of pipes, she did make an appearance on stage at the Oscars—just not as a nominee.

"My father, who usually does not follow these kinds of things, was listening as they announced that year's nominations," Henson recalls, right before she quietly relays that he was also dying of cancer at the time. "Except, of course, I didn't get one!" Even now, there is disappointment in her voice when she says this, and also a trace of surprise, as if her father's vision was all but writ in stone.

Still, an edgy hip-hop tune from the film was recognized, one with a title that forever upended the graying Academy—and single-handedly upped the cool factor of the evening. "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" won the Oscar for Best Original Song in March 2006. Henson was the voice behind that unforgettable hook, and the award.

"He knew I'd been asked to perform it at the Oscars," she says. "But he died two weeks before the show, so he didn't get to see me there. And, well, that's OK. Because maybe he's pulling some strings for me on a different level now, you know what I mean?"

It's been a big few years for this homegrown beauty. The hoopla of *Hustle & Flow* raised Henson's industry profile considerably. There was the quick-to-video release of *Smokin' Aces* (2006), a Vegas caper that co-starred Ben Affleck and Hollywood favorite Jeremy Piven, which was then followed by a serious star turn in *Talk to Me* (2007) opposite actor's actor Don Cheadle.

Cheadle plays D.C.'s legendary, incendiary radioman Ralph "Petey" Greene, an ex-con-turned-activist-shock-jock from the late '60s



Henson backs up on-screen boyfriend Don Cheadle in summer 2007's *Talk to Me*.

and early '70s. Maverick Greene dressed in loud velvet suits and was even louder on-air; he voiced the unfiltered anger born of an era—civil rights, assassinations, Vietnam—to an audience that embraced it and reflected it back. Henson plays his flamboyant girlfriend, Vernell, in the film. Like Shug before her, the character was the heart and soul behind the hero—or should we say hope and love?—and the actress threw herself into the part.

"When it comes to acting, Don and I come from the same school of thinking," says Henson, who trained at Howard University's Department of Theatre Arts after a pragmatic, if failed, attempt at studying electrical engineering at North Carolina A&T. "When Don is in character, he just *disappears*. All you see is the character. It's like, 'Hello? Where'd Don go?' He is *gone*. And I strive to do the same."

When she auditioned for the role, did she spill the fact that she and Greene share a hometown? That her relatives listened to him

religiously? That her childhood stomping grounds were not far from the then-blighted streets that were nearly destroyed by the riots ignited by Martin Luther King's murder?

"I am passionate about doing the research and showing up prepared," she answers. "But because I'm from D.C., I don't have to act it. I only have to perfect this woman who comes from that place and time, a time when people *rebelled*. They *marched*. They wanted something changed? Well, they spoke their *minds*. I never brought it up to anyone ... but I did bring it to the character."

The film's director, Kasi Lemmons, best known for the stirring *Eve's Bayou* (1997), knew Henson could flesh out Vernell: "To be both funny and sexy ... means nothing without emotional depth and true vulnerability. Her winningly exuberant performance in the first half of *Talk to Me* is made all the richer by her world-weary wisdom toward the end. This is definitely an actress with an Oscar in her future."

Co-star Cheadle agrees: "Taraji was a god-send to us! Her spirit and energy gave lift to the entire production. I can't wait to work with her again."

If the last few years have seen Henson on a soaring career trajectory, 2008 aims even higher. Henson just wrapped a movie with Cheadle's fellow *Ocean's 11* franchisee Brad Pitt; with Oscar-winning emoter Cate Blanchett; and with the always-commanding Tilda Swinton, who all co-star with her in David Fincher's darkly beautiful drama *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Fincher is the director behind the edgy flicks *Fight Club* and *Seven*; his latest offering, with Henson in a major role, is due to hit Cineplexes next November.

And she shares significant screen time with one-half of Brangelina, the tabloids'

favorite paparazzi target. ("Brad is incredibly normal and easygoing, and Angelina was on set a lot and was always really friendly," Henson says about the pair.) The plot revolves around Pitt's character, a man with a bizarre aging disease—he ages backward, starting out old and growing younger—that had Henson aging, too. "I play his mother! The role called for me to cover a remarkable range, from age 20 to 70," she explains, then adds with a laugh: "I also thought by the time I got to work with Brad Pitt, there'd be some really hot love scenes ... but no such luck!"

Co-star Blanchett was impressed. "We were in the makeup trailer one morning," Henson recounts with obvious pride, "and Cate reached over and touched my hand and said, 'I just love everything you're doing with the character.' My knees knuckled. I stumbled out of there and thought, 'Oh man. I gotta keep it cool! Did she just say that?'"

Filmed in New Orleans, *Button* draws on its bruised locale. But if the actress felt saddened by her surroundings, she never revealed it to colleagues. In fact, she was known for bringing levity to the set. Fincher says, "You can't have more fun than getting to work with the quick wit and boundless creativity of someone like Taraji ... I always knew when I saw her face, I was going to have a good day."

But the world will have to wait to see the Henson-Pitt performance, because the small screen beckons first. David E. Kelley, Hollywood's go-to guy for surefire hits, asked her to join his latest endeavor, that little show known as *Boston Legal*. She's playing a tough and unapologetic defense attorney who takes no prisoners. Which is why the role is such a stretch.

"I'm not wired to think like a lawyer. All that jargon! I'm on the Internet every single night now, looking stuff up," she laughs. "But what was really, really nice about this opportunity was that David sought me out for the role. He called me, and I didn't have to audition. And that's a really great place to be."

Is she worried about minimizing her success on the big screen by becoming a known quantity on the smaller one?

"Not at all," she says. "It's a new audience for me ... I never shut doors or burn bridges. And I'm just thrilled to be working on such a great show with such a great cast." *Boston Legal*, for those not in the know, stars such luminaries as Candice Bergen, James Spader and Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner.

And let's not forget: By adding television to her repertoire, Henson can expand her long-held dreams, first ignited by a proud father. Because Oscar, after all, is not the only game in town. Did someone say ... Emmy? 🎬

You were born and raised in D.C. Tell us, where might we spot you when you come back home to the District? Tell us your favorite local haunts.

You might catch me at Howard [University's] Homecoming. But other than that, home! I come back to D.C. all the time, because I have so much family there. But [you] won't see me out ... when I go out, I can never relax, because too many people know me now!

Back in the '80s, you auditioned but did not get accepted into Washington's renowned Duke Ellington High School for the Performing Arts. Any feelings of "Uh-huh, told you so"?

Maybe there's a little of that, or used to be, but not so much anymore. I realized I had a different journey ... my timeline was my own. I didn't get to L.A. until I was 26, with a young child [she's a single mother to Marcel, now 13], no connections, and just \$700 in my pocket. And I didn't get my real break with *Baby Boy* [John Singleton's inner-city drama from 2001] for a few years after that. People told me I was too old, that I had only a short time to peak, but I just refused to believe it. Look at Edie Falco. She was in her thirties before she broke out with *The Sopranos*!

Do you have any words of wisdom for other ambitious, talented kids who don't immediately see their dreams realized?

I would tell kids not to compare themselves to anyone else. And that they have to see it for themselves—really see it—to believe it's gonna happen.

You were honored with a "Triple Threat" scholarship at Howard University because you do it all: act, sing and dance. Should we anticipate a J.Lo move anytime soon, and expect a record release and accompanying music video?

I was just in the studio doing a spoken word piece, and I kept hearing, "You need to record an album!" But I just need to take my time and do it right. Everything I do, I want it to last forever. I want it to be worthy of a time capsule, for someone to dig up years from now and say, "Wow ..."

Who are your heroes in Washington, Hollywood and beyond?

From D.C., my parents. As for Hollywood, Don Cheadle's body of work is closest to what I'm aiming for. I want to be the female Don Cheadle. I want to be known as a character actress, not the pretty girl. As for everyone else, I admire the people who break the mold, who tear down stereotypes. Like Oprah Winfrey. And Hillary Clinton. Josephine Baker. And Bessie Coleman, the first licensed African-American female aviator.

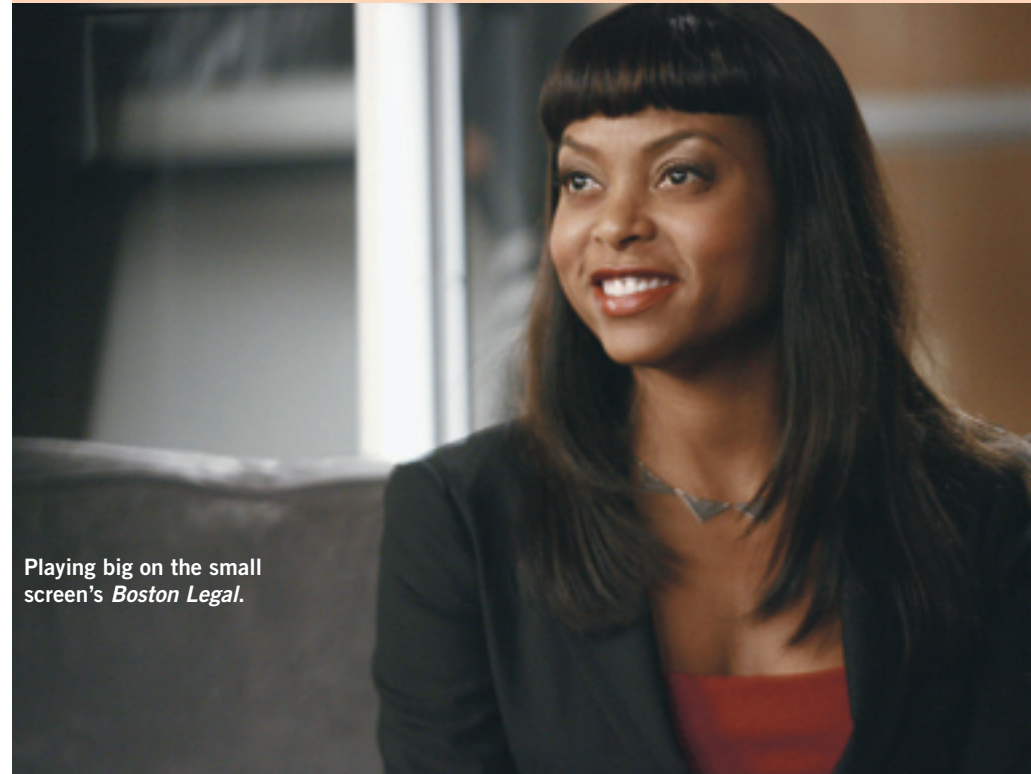
What's the biggest difference between living and working in L.A., and living and working in D.C.?

People in L.A. are too industry-driven. East Coast keeps it real. Folks are down-to-earth. I may have a better diet out here, and that's a good thing, but the people out West are just a little too manicured, if you ask me.



With *Three 6 Mafia*, at the Oscars in 2006.

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Playing big on the small screen's *Boston Legal*.