

FORTUNE COOKIE

TARAJI P. HENSON FINDS HER
ALTER EGO—AND A JUNGLE OF
ANIMAL PRINTS—ON *EMPIRE*.

By Andrew Myers | Photography by John Russo | Styling by James Aguiar
Shot on location at the Montage Residences, Beverly Hills

Hosi top, \$285, by Theory at Bloomingdale's; Avature belt, paillette maxi skirt, \$995, by Haute Hippie; and Lady Jane's stung pumps, \$450, by Sergio Rossi, both at Saks Fifth Avenue; Del Harbour Shops; large Cava cuff in onyx with rock crystal inset, \$35,000, by Kara Ross at Neiman Marcus; Bill Harbour Shops.

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Conventional Hollywood wisdom is that *Empire*—Fox's hourlong musical/drama that chronicles a murderous mogul, his jilted ex-wife and their three comely sons who are competing for control of daddy dearest's hip-hop and entertainment empire—owes much of its success to the series' creators, director-writer-producer-actor Lee Daniels and writer-actor Danny Strong. True, they deserve kudos for their premise, inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear* and James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter*, about family infighting over money, power and parental attention. Snaps also go to the *synergy* of the cast, which includes Terrence Howard, toe taps for the catchy tunes interspersed throughout and major eye pops for the to-die-for fashions. But ask around the watercooler why *Empire*, which premiered in January, is this year's breakout hit, and the answer is simple: Cookie.

She's tough; she's talented; she's of the block and been around the block. She also delivers quips ("The streets ain't made for everyone. That's why they made sidewalks.") with addictive, casual aplomb, and she's unafraid of animal prints that roar rather than meow. "She's very ghetto fabulous, very Lil' Kim, very all-out hip-hop '90s," says Taraji P. Henson, the actor who gives Cookie her crunch. "She's been in jail for 17 years, so she starts out in a time warp. We get to see her have not only a character arc but a fashion arc too!"

Wardrobe is indeed a key ingredient in Henson's Cookie recipe, an aspect of character preparation that is equal parts serious and fun. For clothes, the 44-year-old actor regularly makes her picks from three or four racks of pre-selected options. "Like Cookie, I love color, and I love prints; but I wouldn't wear all prints everywhere... and then add the major shoes... and then the makeup and hair... and then the jewelry! My personal style is a more restrained chic," says Henson, who admits to sharing Cookie's fondness for animal prints but is not wearing fur. "I don't judge, but if I feel fur, I want it to be attached to my dog, who's licking me to tell me he loves me." And that bling? She laughs. "The designers

usually show me three trays of jewelry, and I just put it all on. Cookie didn't grow up with anything, she wants everybody to know she's rich."

Although her character's exterior is very telling, it's the interior that Henson finds most fascinating. "I know I'm good at playing characters that could be stereotypical, but I make them real. And I do that by playing *why* they're the way they are. Then an audience can understand them, maybe even like them." And how does Henson feel about Cookie? "I love her. She's the truth. That's why people feel her so strong and deep," says Henson. "Yes, she sold drugs. And, yes, that's one of the worst things anyone could possibly do. But Cookie did it to feed her family. She also manned up, did her time and broke the cycle of poverty. ... Now if she were rich and selling drugs, that's another matter entirely."

Henson's feats of craft and talent, empathy and imagination have garnered the actress and singer starring roles in TV series such as *The Division* and *Person of Interest*; an Oscar nomination for best performance by a supporting actress in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*; four BET Awards; and most recently, two NAACP Image Awards for outstanding actress in a motion picture for *No Good Deed* and entertainer of the year.

Among her longtime champions is director John Singleton, who cast the actress in two films: *Baby Boy* and *Four Brothers*. Singleton was also instrumental in Henson landing the role of Slug in *Hustle & Flow*, which he co-produced. "I need your eyes for Slug. That's what John said to me," she remembers. A pivotal film in her career, *Hustle & Flow* put Henson opposite future *Empire* co-star Howard and served as the platform for her singing debut. She provided the vocals for the Three 6 Mafia track "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp," which won the Academy Award for best original song in 2006 and which she performed live at the Oscars ceremony. It also paved the way for her next breakout role, as Queenie in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Her next four films over the next 12 months, including Tyler Perry's *I*

Urban stretch jacket, \$1,895, by Donna Karan
New York at londondayles.com; brown diamond
rose gold T-bolt Bvrii Y-chain necklace, \$23,475,
by Sidney Garber, black diamond and rose gold
Chrysler necklace, \$7,425, by Eva Fehren, and
spike knuckle ring, \$10,720, by Inessa Meier,
all at bunneys.com.





Cobaltine jacket, \$3,285, and Azor pearl and metal pendant necklace, \$2,285, both of Louis, Design District; draped silk Georgetown top, \$345, by Halston Heritage of halston.com; off-white cropped trousers, \$740, of Etro, Bal Harbour Shops; Petra ring in rose chrome diaphane, \$8,995, by Kara Ross of Neiman Marcus, Bal Harbour Shops; shoes by Peter Dinkels.

Hair by Kim Kimble for Pantene Makeup by Adhwa Shauiff using Dior and KBA

Can Do Bad All by Myself (the only film in which Henson has been the sole lead), were a culmination of all her winning previous work.

How did Henson first cultivate, and later refine, the gifts that allow her to transform would-be clichés into captivating characters—her Cookie Monster in particular? Why, via the artists' trifecta of adversity, obstacles and perseverance, of course. As an only child who was born to parents who split when she was young, she was named for the Swahili words for love and hope (Taraji Penda), and was raised by her mother in a tough area of southeastern Washington, D.C. Her mom, Bernice Gordon, worked in a distribution center for a local department store; her dad, Boris, who played an important role in her life, was a maintenance man and freelance metal worker. "We never lived in the projects, but we were in the 'hood, lower middle class, living paycheck to paycheck," says Henson.

figured, so what? Deep down I knew I still wanted to be an actress. I had an English class in the theater arts building. I'd see all those crazy and eclectic people, and I knew I was one of them."

At her father's urging, Henson transferred to Howard University to study acting and stayed the course after giving birth to son Marcell during her junior year. Then, armed with a degree in theatre arts, she moved to L.A.—Dad even passed the hat to friends and family and raised \$700 to help with the move. "How do you expect to catch fish on dry land?" he asked me. The lines, the wisdom, the truth... I put a lot of my dad into Cookie," she says.

In true aspiring-actor style, Henson held assorted temp jobs, then found full-time work at an accounting firm and as a substitute teacher. She and Marcell lived in humble digs, close enough to the freeway to make their furniture rattle when trucks roared by, with leaky

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As a tween in the early '80s in the nation's capital, Henson had a front-row seat for the crack epidemic then ravaging American inner cities. "I remember watching our 13-inch black-and-white TV, and the newscasters were talking about crack. I saw the destruction happen firsthand in families, on the streets and in the schools. No hope, no jobs. Despair." While many schools saw their after-school and extracurricular programs cut, the drama club at hers was not. It became her refuge and her passion. "I loved acting; I loved everything about it," she says.

Henson's dreams of acting were temporarily shattered, however, when she applied to—and was rejected from—the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. So she forsook acting and the arts, embraced the sciences and eventually sought an electrical engineering degree at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. That is, until she failed pre-calculus. "And it wasn't even calc. And I had two tutors! How was I going to be an engineer?" she says. "But then I

faucets and shag carpet of questionable color. Advocates, such as her longtime manager, Vincent Cirincione, gave her pep talks. "Vince always told me the two things that hooked him were that I moved to L.A. with my son, so he knew I wasn't messing around, and that although I always had a 9 to 5 job, I never missed an audition or used it as an excuse," she says. "Not that I wasn't making plenty of excuses at work—'A pipe just burst in my apartment building and the neighbors don't have a key... and there's water everywhere... and my neighbor's dog just had puppies! Hey, I'm an actress. The one excuse I'd never play was anything involving my son or family!'"

Even on her darkest days, Henson says she never doubted she'd ultimately find success. But first, she, like Cookie, had to learn patience. "Step by step, sure. But were there a lot of steps? Oh, yeah; oh, yeah," she says. Thrilled to have finally gotten to where she wants to be, she's positioned to go even further. In short, Henson has gotten her Cookie, and she's getting to eat her cake too. **B**