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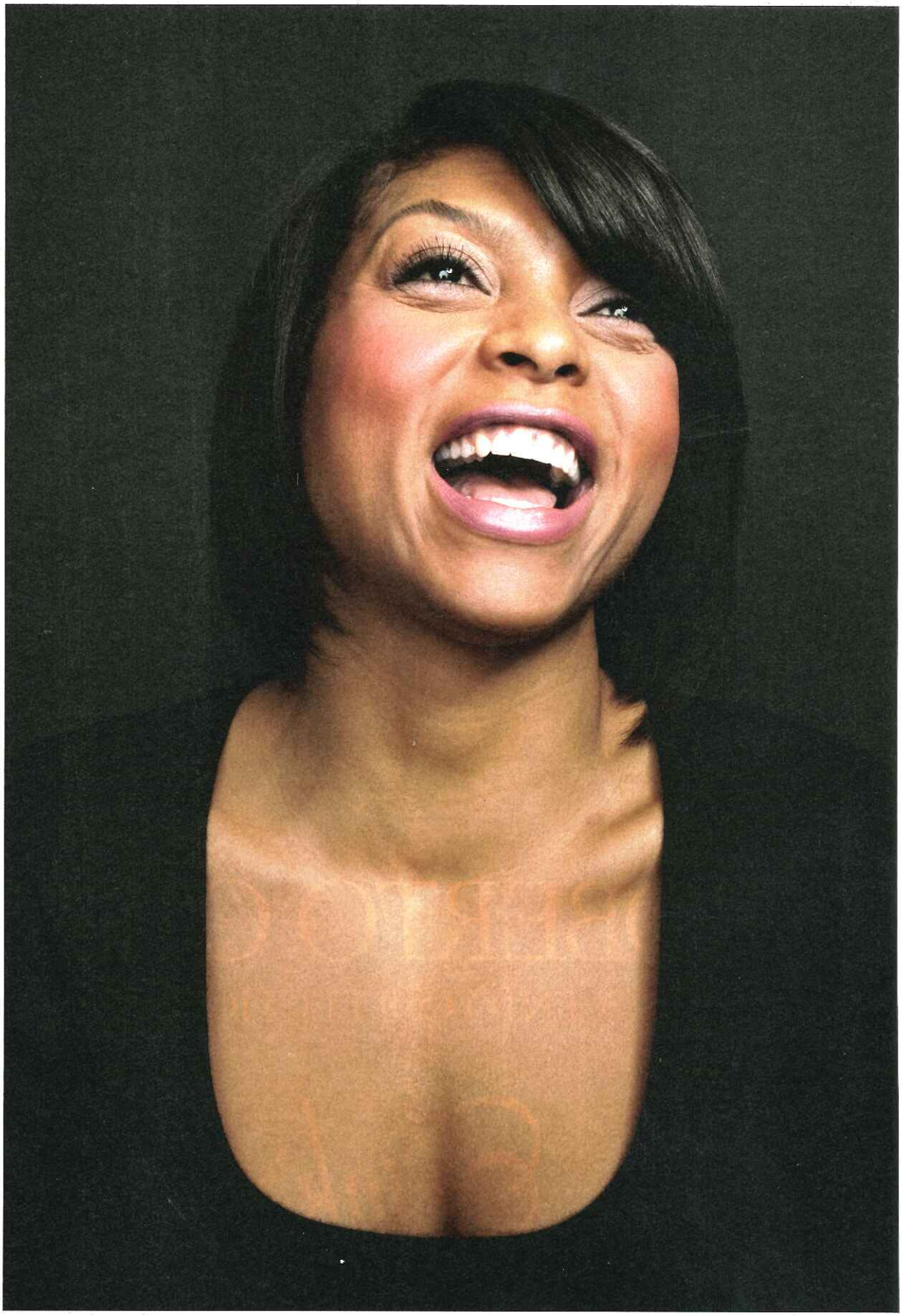
the real Taraji...

How a girl from Southeast became a Hollywood star
By Neely Tucker P.10



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN SMITH FOR ART & SOUL

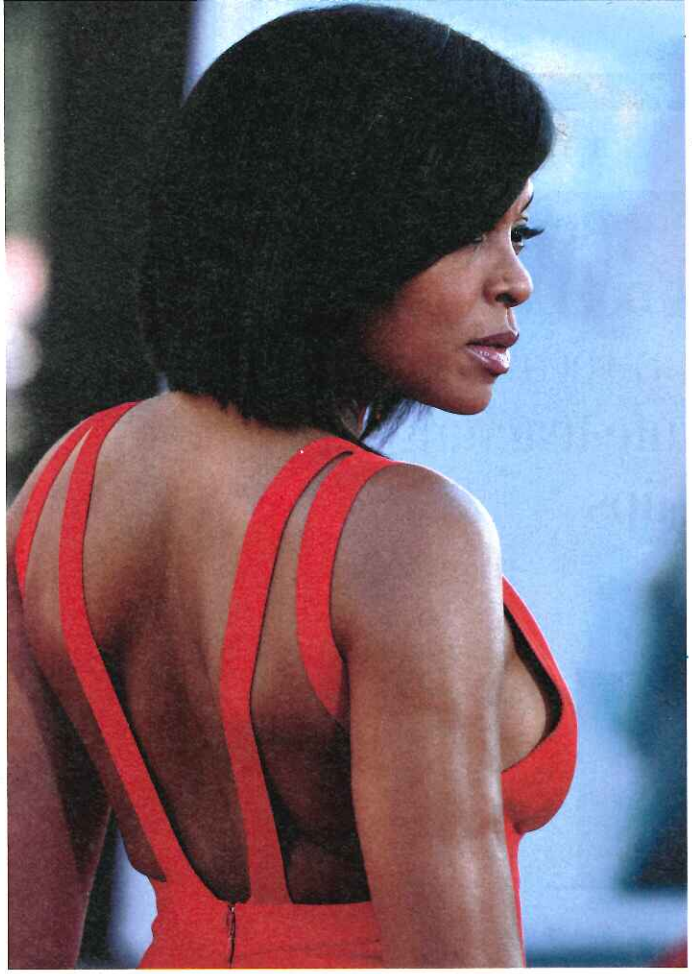
As a star of a hot new CBS crime drama, D.C. native Taraji P. Henson recalls her days of substitute teaching and rejection slips

Actress *of interest*

LOS ANGELES

Taraji Penda Henson, the pride of Southeast D.C., the Oscar- and Emmy-nominated girl from the block gone big-time, is working. She's trying to keep the sweat from showing. ¶ On this evening in late June, the 40-year-old actress is stepping out of a black SUV on Hollywood Boulevard for the premiere of "Larry Crowne," her latest film. She has only a small part, but Tom Hanks asked her to do it, so now she's shrink-wrapped into a knee-length tangerine Hervé Leroux bandage dress — no bra, no back, plunging neckline. ¶ The paparazzi spot the eye candy as soon as she puts a six-inch heel on the red carpet. "TTTAARRRAAAJJIIII!!" "Turn to your left!" "TTAARRAAJJJIII! Show us the back!" ¶ She obliges, then steps up on elevated platforms for the interviews with E! and "Access Hollywood." Then it's into the cavernous theater to her seat, row eight, on the aisle. Hanks and co-star Julia Roberts are cracking wise down front, welcoming the crowd. Henson has no date; the only person in her mini-entourage who is not part of her management team is her longtime friend Jennifer Walker.

BY NEELY TUCKER



After the screening, she's freezing in the air conditioning and exhausted. Success is better than the alternative, but work is still work. She did the BET Awards the night before (she won Best Actress for her role in "I Can Do Bad All by Myself"), then had a late dinner with buddy Mary J. Blige. She worked a day-long photo shoot before the premiere. ¶ But there's still the after party! Inside-the-velvet-rope Hollywood glam! The stuff she fantasized about when she was a gap-toothed chatterbox in a rough little apartment on Livingston Road SE, the one where her mom got mugged in front of her when she was 7 (and then again when she was 9) and where she'd wake up screaming, "Not again! Not again!" ¶ The party is at the Rolling Stone Restaurant a few blocks away. The gawkers are lining the upper floors of the shopping plaza. The mortal attendees are on the patio. Inside, Hanks and the people with his company, Playtone, are at the next table. Cedric the Entertainer is just across the way. Henson slides into a table with her name on it. The music is throbbing. You have to shout. ¶ The food, the music, energizes her. She's getting that moxie back, that Right Stuff, that pull-yourself-up-the-rope-one-damned-hand-at-a-time ambition that took her from Oxon Hill High to a million-dollar home in the Hollywood Hills.

"Wherever it is I'm going in this business, I'm not there yet," she says, laughing. "Who wants to come to Hollywood and be on the B-list? I want the A-list!"

The last of the night flares. Henson's got a screen test at 7 a.m. for a new film, "Think Like a Man." She gets up to leave before almost anyone else. She leans over to shout something.

"I'm going to be asleep in the SUV before it goes two blocks."

The summer and fall of Taraji P. Henson, now starring in one of fall television's most hyped new shows, CBS's "Person of Interest," has been hectic. This is good. In the 15 years since she came to Los Angeles — as a single mom, broke, no connections, no house, no car, no job — there have been long stretches when she had no acting work at all.

Things had gotten so bleak that Henson was reluctant to go to a Saturday morning audition for the role that would change her career, the Oscar-nominated part of Queenie in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." The garage sale she had scheduled seemed more promising.

"I had wig heads with hats, jewelry — it was a serious garage sale. I was very annoyed I had to cancel it to go to an audition."

She was thinking about this on a cloudless day in early June, lingering over a lazy lunch at a sidewalk table at Le Clafoutis on Sunset Strip. Though this is one of the most celebrity-dense stretches on the planet, she sits unnoticed for two hours. The only person who approaches her is a vagrant asking for money.

"It never really occurred to me that I wouldn't make it out here; it was just surviving in the interim," she says, giving the guy a couple of bucks and a smile. "Now, did the interim seem *rreeeeaaallllly* long?" She laughs. "Yeah. Yes. Sure."

The rest of the summer seemed like a blur:

Two weeks before the "Crowne" premiere, she popped into Washington to give the graduation speech at Anacostia High School. A week after, she was in New Orleans to promote a 2012 film in which she stars, "From the Rough," at the Essence Music Festival. She also filmed "Think Like a Man," based on the Steve Harvey book, turned up at Comic-Con

in San Diego to promote "POI," and shot the video for "Stay," the latest single from her friend Tyrese Gibson. She picked up an Emmy nomination for her lead role in "Taken From Me: The Tiffany Rubin Story," on Lifetime last year.

In between was real life: Seeing after Marcel, her now-17-year-old son, who is entering his senior year at a private school in Los Angeles, and making sure that, among other chores, he doesn't forget to pick up behind Willie, their silky terrier. Getting an apartment in New York while shooting the new show. Getting some wiring done in her Moroccan-style house in the Hollywood Hills. Throwing out the trash.

The difference between Henson and her on-screen personas can be striking.

In film, she often portrays hard-luck, characters — a pregnant prostitute, a troubled girlfriend, an alcoholic club singer, the matron of an old folks' home.

In person, she's funnier, softer and prettier than those roles would suggest. She's a girly girl with a doting maternal streak, an infectious laugh and a shoe fetish. She has never been married and says that dating in Hollywood isn't the party-all-the-time scene that fans seem to picture. ("I meet guys who are infatuated with me or who are infatuated with what I do, but actual relationships are difficult.") She peppers her conversations with good-natured profanity.

There's not much diva there. Meeting a reporter one morning at her house, she wore yoga pants, a gray T-shirt, almost no makeup and her hair pulled back. She talked about electrical outlets, cooking, Marcel's homework and shopping at Target.

"She's the one you bring to the party to have everyone in stitches," says Tracie Jenkins, her best friend since they met in the seventh grade in Washington.

Sanaa Lathan, the actress, counts Henson as one of her closest friends.

"She has this bubbly, bright spirit, without any of the competitiveness you find in a lot of other actresses," Lathan says.

Henson's latest shot at moving onto that coveted A-list is "Person of Interest."

In it, she plays Det. Carter, a stylish New York cop tracking down the mysterious Jim Caviezel, playing a presumed-dead former CIA agent who, with a partner, has access to the Social Security numbers of people about to be involved in deadly violence.

"Taraji is this sincerely beautiful woman who has been able to inhabit all these wildly disparate characters [in her career]," says Jonathan Nolan, the show's co-producer. "We're very lucky to have her. ... She'll be the moral center of this show's universe."

Getting these sorts of reviews has never been Henson's problem. Persuading people to cast her — even with those reviews — has been another story.

In her first film, John Singleton's "Baby Boy," in 2001, she got raves from critics. After that, nobody gave her a film job for three years.

The only movie in which she has been offered the sole lead, Tyler Perry's "I Can Do Bad All by Myself," opened at No. 1 at the box office, and went on to gross $51 million on an $8 million budget. In a small-budget indie flick, "Hustle & Flow," she took the role of a mousy, pregnant prostitute — and wound up belting out the chorus to the movie's Oscar-winning anthem, "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" in front of 80 million television viewers during the 2006 Academy Awards.

New York Times critic A.O. Scott opines that "Ms. Henson is a wonderful actress, capable of moving from tart to tender, from manic to maternal in a single scene." The Chicago Sun-Times has noted her "extraordinary range," and The Washington Post's Ann Hornaday wrote that "she alone is a terrific reason to keep going to the movies."

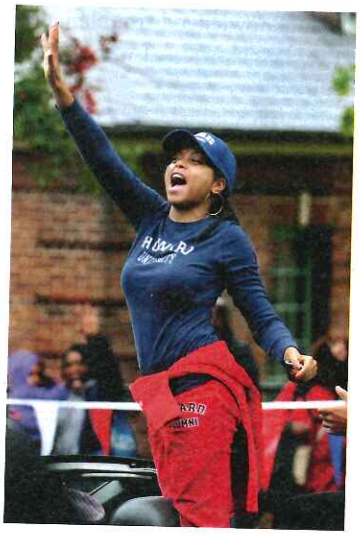
And yet, nobody has ever been kicking down her door.

If not for black directors such as Singleton and Perry, it's not clear if her career would have progressed past cable television.

"She'd lose jobs to cookie cutter, 'flavor of the month' girls," says her longtime manager, Vincent Cirrincione, who also has guided Halle Berry's career from its inception. He says that Henson's "look" is not the classically beautiful, romantic leading woman, and that when directors were looking for black actresses, they would look past her.

"She'd be the best girl in the room, but she wouldn't get the part. It's not racism.

HER ROOTS



Opposite page: **Actress Taraji P. Henson arrives for the Hollywood premiere of "Larry Crowne."**
This page, from top: **A young Taraji with her mother; Taraji and her father; Henson waves during Howard University's 2009 Homecoming Parade.**

PARADE PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK GAIL; FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF TARAJI HENSON

Nobody's complaining. It's just how it is."

Henson, on why she went from working with the esteemed director David Fincher on a prestige project such as "Button" to working on "Bad" with Perry, who's regarded as a likable but limited producer of broad comedies:

"He was the only one who called."

Opportunities did not come falling out of the sky in Southeast Washington in the early 1970s.

Henson's mother, Bernice Gordon, worked for the now-defunct Washington area department store chain Woodward & Lothrop, in a distribution center. Her dad, Boris Henson, was a maintenance man at Bolling Air Force Base and freelanced after hours, putting security bars on houses. (A distant relative, Matthew Henson, was the famed polar explorer.)

Her parents split up when she was a toddler. She and her mom were living in a grim three-story apartment complex on Livingston Road when her mother was robbed at gunpoint one night coming home. The second time, a thief smashed her mother's face, detaching a retina, as she and 9-year-old Taraji were getting into their car.

"Taraji was so afraid after that, if we were out at night," Gordon remembers now, in a telephone call from her home in Palm Coast, Fla.

Boris Henson, meanwhile, fell into homelessness. He'd pick up his daughter from school sometimes, and they'd ride around, laughing and making plans for the future. He eventually remarried, got work as a janitor for the Washington Redskins, and was the motivating force behind his daughter's career.

Henson had the fertile imagination of an only child.

She became best friends with Jenkins, her classmate at Friendship Educational Center (since renamed Patricia Roberts Harris Educational Center), a D.C. public school across the street from her apartment.

The girls were both in the drama club and became inseparable. They competed in the District's Miss Talented Teen Contest. Jenkins won; Henson, whose character "jumped out of a window and died" at the end of her skit, was first runner-up. They both went to Ballou for ninth grade, and Henson was an acknowledged troublemaker. "I was the class clown. ... I was downright disruptive."

> "I smoked back then, and every day on my break, I'd go down to the little fountains ... and I'd smoke, and I'd be crying."

Both girls applied to Duke Ellington School for the Arts. Jenkins, who later founded a nonprofit, was accepted. Henson was rejected. She was crushed.

Her mother moved to Maryland, and Henson went to Oxon Hill High School. She and Jenkins remained close, as their parents happened to get apartments in the same complex.

After high school, with her theater dreams appearing to be at a dead end, Henson enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, planning to be an electrical engineer. But she bombed pre-calculus, and her father encouraged her to come home and pursue her dream at Howard University's theater program.

She had to sit out a year, working at the Pentagon as a receptionist to repay her A&T student loans. Once she started back at school, she worked the Pentagon job in the morning and as a singing and dancing waitress on "The Spirit of Washington" cruise ship in the evenings. Then, her junior year, she got pregnant. It wasn't planned.

"She called and told me she was pregnant, and I went crazy on the phone," Gordon remembers. "She said, 'Mama, I knew you were going to act this way, so I'm going to hang up the phone now.' "

She stuck it out, performing on stage through her second trimester. After Marcel was born, she'd lug him around campus, keeping to her class schedule. She graduated with a child, a ton of student loan debt and not one job prospect. (She did not marry Marcel's father, William Johnson, who was killed in Washington in 2003, and declines to talk about him.)

Her dad told her there was nothing to do but go to Hollywood. He passed a hat. Family and friends kicked in $700. A friend who worked at an airline spotted her two tickets.

Her mother was terrified. "You hear horror stories."

Henson's plane touched down in February 1996, five years after the first major opening for modern black cinema in Hollywood. In 1991, three low-budget films with almost entirely black casts and sensibilities — "Boyz N the Hood," "New Jack City" and "Jungle Fever" — pulled in more than $40 million each at the box office.

Studios took notice.

"Boomerang," a romantic comedy with Eddie Murphy and Berry, did even better, and "Waiting to Exhale," in 1995, pulled in $81 million.

By the last years of the decade, a new genre was being created: the Black Middle Class Ensemble Romantic Comedy. Write a flirty script, recruit an attractive young cast, spend about $8 million, and you could gross about $30 million.

"Soul Food" (1997), "The Wood" (1999), "The Best Man" (1999), "Love and Basketball" (2000) and "The Brothers" (2001) all followed that basic formula. The films introduced mainstream audiences to an array of talent still working: Lathan, Terrence Howard, Gabrielle Union, Omar Epps, Morris Chestnut.

Henson, meanwhile, was working a $10-per-hour temp job at the accounting firm Hutchinson and Bloodgood, and driving a $3,500, beat-up Nissan Sentra. She was living in a North Hol-

lywood apartment so close to the 170 freeway that "the place shook when 18-wheelers passed." She then moved to an apartment in East L.A.

It was two bedrooms, $500 per month, had lime-green shag carpeting, and the neighborhood frightened Walker.

"If you're from the hood, which Taraji is, you wouldn't be scared," she says of the place. "But it was like, wow. You wouldn't want to walk around at night."

Once her temp job turned full-time, Henson signed on with veteran agent Shirley Wilson. Henson got a bit part in an episode of "Sister, Sister" but not much else. It was depressing.

"I smoked back then, and every day on my break, I'd go down to the little fountains they had there at Hutchinson, and I'd smoke, and I'd be crying."

She soon moved over to working with talent manager Cirrincione. He helped her start making inroads, with appearances on shows such as "Smart Guy" and "E.R." She'd get about $2,500 for these, eventually progressing to $5,000. When she was cast in a television movie called "Satan's School for Girls" in 2000, they paid her $10,000.

She quit her receptionist job and soon got certified for substitute teaching in Los Angeles County schools. It had the benefit of a flexible schedule, but the downside of dysfunction.

"One of these kids in fourth grade called me a bitch, threw a chair at me and walked out," she said, shaking her head. "And the principal and his mother wanted me to let him back in class."

At home, she sat on the floor and made candles to sell for extra cash. She bought her furniture from Ikea, assembling it with "a screwdriver and a glass of wine" after Marcel went to bed.

During the days, she started going to an actors "boot camp," run by veteran Bill Duke. She was in one of those sessions when Singleton stopped by. He was making a follow-up to "Boyz N the Hood," set in the same rough L.A. neighborhoods, and was looking for a young actress to play Yvette, the girlfriend of Tyrese Gibson, the film's star. He hired her.

The movie, "Baby Boy," was profane, sexually explicit (she simulated having intense sex on camera), and a pop-culture touchstone. Critics raved.

She was 30 years old. She had been in town for four years. It looked as if she had just broken through.

"We thought, 'Wow, that's your big break!'" Walker remembers.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL GIBSON/FOCUS FEATURES

"It was so exciting!"

But the movie paid just $65,000, and then nothing else happened. She did not get another film offer for three years — and that would be a small part in another Singleton film.

"I was substitute-teaching the day before we started shooting," she remembers, "and I went back to substitute-teaching the day after we wrapped."

In 2003, seven years after moving to L.A., she finally — just barely — became a full-time actress.

She landed a spot on the Lifetime series "The Division," as detective Raina Washington. She recalls doing more than 20 episodes over the next three seasons, at $22,000 per show.

It paid off her student loans. It let her enroll Marcel in a private school. And it let her make the down payment on a two-bedroom, 1,500-square-foot house in Glendale (with a small swimming pool) that she would call home for the next seven years.

"You could see the Hutchinson and Bloodgood building from the house, over to the left," she says. "I remember telling Marcel that, we'd look out the window and I'd tell him how I cried and I wasn't happy."

The decisive moment in a career often doesn't appear to be decisive, particularly in Hollywood, where careers are "more like pinball than bowling — nothing happens in a straight line," Cirrincione says.

Here's how Henson finally became a star.

About the time "The Division" was wrapping up, Singleton was filming "Four Brothers," a drama set in Detroit, with Mark Wahlberg as the headliner.

Henson persuaded him to give her a tiny part in the film, but more important, he was also helping produce "Hustle & Flow," an independent film set in Memphis. It was about a pimp with dreams of a rap career. Terrence Howard was the star, and he was intent on actress Meagan Good playing the part of Shug, a not-too-smart prostitute with the proverbial heart of gold.

But Singleton liked Henson for the part, sent her the script, and she eventually blew away Howard and director Craig Brewer in auditions.

> "There are a lot of white actresses who would love to be in ... Taraji's position. ... It's so, so rare where she's at right now."

Since the character's name was Shug, short for sugar, Henson decided to make her sweet to the bone, a young woman who had convinced herself that even turning $5 tricks was an act of love.

She prepared in her standard way: reading the script over and over, from beginning to end, never reading a section or just her lines. She would walk around the house, trying to get the character to possess her.

"If you had cameras in the house, you'd think I was crazy. I really do talk out loud. 'Shug, talk to me. Tell me what you want.'"

In the resulting film, she has one of the key emotional moments. Howard, the pimp, is in the process of laying down tracks for his big song. Shug, who has already recorded her part, gets a pair of headphones and listens as the engineer plays it back.

It is the first time she has ever heard the power of her own voice.

The camera comes in tight on her face. Henson plays it as a state of dawning wonder; her eyebrows rise, wrinkles appear in her forehead. Her hand comes slowly to her mouth. Her eyes dart back and forth. She is in awe, if not in love, with her own performance.

"That was the part of the movie that got everybody, that scene," Singleton remembers. "She made Shug a real, live person. You could feel the audience fall in love with her."

Laray Mayfield, the casting director for "Benjamin Button," saw the movie, and that moment, when she was looking to cast Queenie. That role called for an actress to play a matron of a retirement home in New Orleans who raises a freakish orphan as her own child. The part would require to her appear as everything from a young mother to an old woman. Mayfield thought Henson was perfect.

She called. Henson, by then back in Glendale with that garage sale scheduled, reluctantly agreed to cancel it and come in to audition. She was astonished when she arrived and found the audition was only for her.

"It was the biggest role of my life," she says, "and the easiest to get."

She didn't win the Oscar — Penélope Cruz did — but some things change when you're an Oscar nominee. After years of struggling to get any film work, in a 12-month stretch in 2008 and 2009, she was in four films: "The Family That Preys," "Button," "Not Easily Broken," "I Can Do Bad All by Myself," and signed on to be the mom in the Will Smith-produced reboot of "The Karate Kid."

The last did $359 million of business worldwide.

These days, Hanks calls. Jonathan Nolan calls.

But it's not as if it's easy street. Cirrincione says she's still not getting many calls for work. As Ruben Santiago-Hudson, a longtime friend and Tony-winning actor, points out, there are very few roles for black women older than 40.

"I just hope they appreciate her on 'Person,'" he says. "There are notable actors on that show ... but there's only one Academy Award nominee."

Lathan, who has now had leading roles in films for 15 years, says it's important to keep perspective.

"The fact is that there are a lot of white actresses who would love to be in my position or Taraji's position," she says. "Only one percent of actors make a living at

"BABY BOY" PHOTOGRAPH BY ELI REED/COLUMBIA PICTURES; "HUSTLE & FLOW" PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN SPEARMAN/PHOTOPOST/PARAMOUNT PICTURES; "TALK TO ME" PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL GIBSON/FOCUS FEATURES; "THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON" PHOTOGRAPH BY MERRICK MORTON/PARAMOUNT PICTURES; "I CAN DO BAD ALL BY MYSELF" PHOTOGRAPH © AF ARCHIVE/ALAMY

HER ROLES

"Baby Boy" (2001)
with Tyrese Gibson

"Hustle & Flow" (2005)
with Terrence Howard

"Talk to Me" (2007)
with Don Cheadle

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" (2008)
with Brad Pitt

"I Can Do Bad All by Myself" (2009)
with Brian J. White

it. Taraji is not only making a living, but she's reached the highest level. It's so, so rare where she's at right now."

Henson opens the door to her house on an early summer morning, cheerful, happy, glad to have a free day. The place is empty — Marcel is off studying for exams — and she's being her "weird, goofy" self.

The house is a $1.3 million, three-story place in the hills above Hollywood. Her Porsche Cayenne S is in the tiny garage. On the first floor, she has an entryway with photos and mementos from her career, and a media room, replete with a theater-style screen. The dining room and kitchen are on the second floor, the bedrooms on the third. The doors are all heavy wood. The ceilings are all high, high, high.

"The house is just so ethnic," she says. "It feels like me."

She gives a tour, pointing out her pool table, the "glam room" where she gets dressed, a small office, a spacious bedroom (with a little bed for Willie, the dog, right beside hers), a bathroom with a hot tub, and a walk-in closet with rows and rows of shoes.

She reads her scripts by a fireplace on the third-floor landing. On the mantel, there is a small picture and memorial to "My Love Dove Dad." Boris Henson died of cancer in 2006, two weeks before he would have seen her sing on the Academy Awards. She was sitting by his side.

She goes outside on the second floor, the level of the house with the small yard clinging onto the hillside.

You can see forever. The glass towers of downtown are off to the left, Hollywood and its dreams somewhere down to the right, and the ocean in the distance.

This is where she's gotten. This is where she is. This is home now.

She stands in the grassy yard, a little breeze coming up the canyon, the morning sun soft, hazy, not too warm. She's smiling, barefoot, the City of Angels spread out before her.

Taraji Henson, pride of Southeast, in the summer of her 40th year. tpp

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