

A close-up portrait of Taja V. Simpson, a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark, sequined, patterned top. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

# first person

with Taja V. Simpson *by Erin Kelly*

**First Person** is a monthly Q&A that features compelling people who excel in their chosen endeavors. Ideas for future Q&As? Email [edit@thriveswla.com](mailto:edit@thriveswla.com).

As a little girl in Lake Charles, **Taja V. Simpson** would watch her favorite movies again and again. She'd memorize and recite the lines. She portrayed each character, just for fun. A seed had been planted, although she was barely aware of it. By the time she graduated from McNeese State University, the seed had grown to a full-fledged dream—one that led away from Southwest Louisiana and straight to Hollywood, where she could pursue acting and climb the uphill battle to stage and screen.

In the years since, Simpson has acted and directed television, theater, and film. She landed a regular role on "The Bold and the Beautiful"; appeared on "Grey's Anatomy"; and was most recently seen on TV Land's "The Soul Man" with Cedric the Entertainer. Other roles have included "The Young and the Restless," "Real Husbands of Hollywood," "Mystery Girls," "NCIS-LA," and "Benched." Simpson has also hosted programs like the NAACP Theatre Festival and served as a presenter at the NAACP Theatre Awards. This year, she'll appear in five feature films—"The Preacher's Son," opening in theaters to limited release; "The Baker's Man" on DVD; Alton & "Kenya's Outrageous Wedding," also on DVD; and two films on the film festival circuit.

*Simpson admits that it's not a business for the faint of heart, but when you're following a dream, giving up is not an option. She recently shared her continuing journey in an interview with Thrive.*

### **When and how did you discover your love of acting?**

I discovered my love for acting when I was in elementary school. I would watch movies, learn all the lines, and recite them over and over and over again. I didn't realize at the time I was 'acting,' I just really enjoyed movies. I could literally watch a movie one time and the next time I would see it, I found myself reciting the dialogue as if I was each of the characters. At that time I didn't realize this was a profession I could actually pursue and there weren't any acting classes for kids that I could get into to cultivate that skill, so it was more like a hobby.

It wasn't until I graduated college that I began pursuing the craft. Then I fell in love with all facets of it. I learned all the different styles—Stanislavski, Adler, Meisner—and quickly realized the type of things I did since I was a kid were actually different 'techniques.' I believe my diligence and persistence then still influences my work ethic. Just as much as I was in love with acting as a kid, I'm even more in love with it now.

### **When was the first time you saw yourself on screen?**

The first time I saw myself on screen was when I booked my first short film, 'The Greater Ambition.' It was also my very first audition! After wrapping the movie, the producers held a screening and seeing myself was hard, actually. I critiqued everything I did. I remember sitting in my chair with my hand up over my face. When the credits began to roll, I was like, 'Whew, so glad that's over.' But then I had to face the many people who came out to see it. I put my brave face on and held my head up high and awaited the feedback. People were coming over to me saying how much they enjoyed my performance. I was floored!

Sometimes as an actor you constantly strive to be better and can be very hard on yourself. However, I learned so much from that experience and now I don't worry about it. I do the work, give my all, and leave it all 'in the can.' When I walk away from a production, I know it will be great because I've literally done my best.

### **You've mentioned previously that your appearance on Grey's Anatomy was a turning point for you, personally and professionally. In what way?**

I started watching Grey's Anatomy from the very first episode. I can remember sitting my apartment in Glendale, California, and thinking, this is going to be an amazing show. Over the years and being an avid watcher, I'd dream of walking down the halls of Grey-Sloan Memorial and talking to Meredith and Christina. So when I booked the show it was literally a dream come true!



Simpson behind the camera.



Onset Mystery: On set with Tori Spelling and Jennie Garth



The Soul Man 3: Simpson with Cedric the Entertainer



On set at Grey's Anatomy

When you attain a goal or feel as if a 'dream has come true' it can be a turning point in your life. You realize all the hard work, time, effort, energy and dedication it has taken to get you that place. You deserve to sit back, enjoy the moment and the fruits of your labor. This industry comes with a great deal of rejection and I'd labored for quite a while to get to that point. It certified I was doing what I was born to do and that was a huge turning point for me.

**You became a regular guest on The Bold and the Beautiful. What was that experience like?**

I used to always hear, "...working on a soap is a fantastic training ground." Now that I've been on "The Bold & The Beautiful", I definitely see what people were referring to. I like to call it a fine-oiled tune machine. You get your script and the rundown for the day prior to arrival. The rundown shows you the scene order they will be filming that day. Blocking rehearsal is at 9 a.m. and 'On Camera' starts promptly at ten, and is typically done at 6 p.m. It's the perfect 9-to-5 job doing what you love! A soap opera set is different because all scenes are shot one time—that's right, only once. Being on this set has given me even more respect for these actors as they nail it the first time, every time. I believe greatness begets greatness and working on a soap opera has made me an even better actor.

**What are some of your favorite films?**

This is actually the hardest question! I have so many, but here are a few: A Beautiful Mind, The Notebook, Remember The Titans, Rudy, Mrs. Doubtfire, The Shawshank Redemption, Heat, E.T., Titanic, Troy and of course my childhood favorite, The Last Dragon. To name a few!

**How do you stay motivated in such a tough and competitive business?**

My faith is what keeps me motivated. I'm passionate about what I do and I believe I'm working in my calling so it makes it easy to deal with the rejection. I just say, 'That one wasn't for me' or 'on to the next,' and keep it moving. What's meant for me is for me and that keeps a smile on my face. Ecclesiastes 9:11 says, "The race is not given to the swift nor the strong but he who endures until the end." I'm in it for the long haul, so giving up is not an option.

**How has being an actor changed the way you view films and TV as a consumer?**

As a consumer, when I watch movies or television, I watch as any audience or moviegoer would. I've paid money to enjoy a great piece of cinema so I go into it hoping to be satisfied. However, if something stands out while watching—good or bad—the actor or director side of me definitely takes note.

**What are your hopes for the road ahead?**

The road ahead looks pretty darn good. I'm currently working on an on-line network to bring quality family fun television back to the world—TVS-TV.

**What advice would you give to young people who have big dreams?**

Steve Jobs says, "Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking and don't settle! As with all matters of the heart, you'll know when you find it."

I love this quote because before I knew this was something Steve Jobs has said, it's something I've always given as advice. However, the quote is perfect. Be limitless. Change your mindset and believe you can do anything. Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."



A selfie on set with Jennie Garth of "Mystery Girls"

Simpson's script and headshot for Grey's Anatomy