

The Rise of Tika Sumpter

The star of *Mixed-ish* talks about her new sitcom, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, producing, and being a boss

Words by Vanessa Pascale



Photo Credit: Mackenzie Stroh

I arrive at Bar Margot at the Four Seasons Hotel Atlanta around lunchtime. It is the last Saturday of February. The restaurant is hosting a number of patrons, including *This is Us*' Justin Hartley, who is dining at an adjacent table. I spot Tika seated nearby and wave; she is wrapping up lunch with a girlfriend. She joins me at my table; the waiter brings over her leftover glass of Chardonnay. Tika is dressed in an olive green athleisure set and her black hair is in long braids that flow down to her hips. She is undoubtedly a classic beauty, but her beauty is further accentuated by her warm, animated personality (her sweet thank-you text message after our interview, with spot-on GIFs, cracked me up) and ever-present grin (we laughed a lot).

So refreshingly affable, I barely believe Tika when she tells me (later on in our interview) that fans might be surprised to find out that she is actually introverted. "They wouldn't recognize that when they see me in interviews, but in my life, I'm the quietest one in the room," says Tika, who prefers reading a book or curling up on the couch and not talking over socializing. "I know I have to do it because I'm in this business, but it takes a lot for me to actually cut through that and like, suit myself up and go talk. I could just be quiet and disappear. Sometimes, at family gatherings they're like, 'Where's Tika?' I'm out. I'm like in the room, door closed, nobody knows where I am. I'm like, *Do I need therapy?* I'm in therapy, but I'm like, *Do we need to talk about that?*" She laughs and flashes that gorgeous smile of hers.

Tika has much to smile about. The Queens, New York-born actress has been working in the entertainment industry for over fifteen years now, appearing in films alongside Hollywood heavyweights (*Ride Along 1 & 2*, *Get on Up*, *The Old Man & the Gun*) and in highly-acclaimed TV series (*One Life to Live*, *Gossip Girl*, *The Haves and the Have Nots*), but this past year has brought with it a whirlwind of achievements. You could say that Tika has been busy, but that would be an understatement --she completed her script, launched two businesses, saw her new TV series [*Mixed-ish*] reach "hit" status, and watched her latest film [*Sonic the Hedgehog*] gross \$306 million worldwide and become the highest-grossing video game film adaptation of all time in North America.

At the time of our interview, *Sonic the Hedgehog* was thriving in theaters. "It was almost like I was wondering if I was working a job 'cause I was like, we're having so much fun," Tika says about working on *Sonic*, the video game franchise published by Sega. "James Marsden and I, all we would do was laugh. Literally, the entire... I'm like, *Are we getting anything done?* And we did. Jeff Fowler, the director, made it such a fun set that you couldn't do anything but be happy to be there, and we were. We were just super happy," Tika gushes.

The role of Maddie --the wife of town sheriff, Tom, played by James Marsden-- sort of fell into her lap. Surprisingly, Tika's audition happened at their table read. "James was there and all these... Neal Moritz, who is a huge producer. The

table was super long, super intimidating, and I was there and I was like, *I'm reading a role that's not mine yet.*" She laughs. "I knew I wanted to be a part of it because *Sonic* was something that I grew up on. I just knew this is going to be special, fun... After that, they're like, 'Yeah, you got it!' --right at the table," she laughs.

In addition to James and Tika, *Sonic's* cast includes Adam Pally, Ben Schwartz, and Jim Carrey, who portrays Dr. Robotnik. "Jim Carrey came on set, it was like, he's so kind. I think people expect him to be this like, I don't know what people expect super superstars to be, but every time people are like, 'How was he to work with? Was he nice?' I'm like, 'He's so kind to us.' So, it was a dream come true." It was a treat to see Jim's eccentricity back on the big screen (I saw *Sonic* in theaters the night before my interview with Tika). Tika and I recollect our introduction to Jim via the Fox sketch comedy series, *In Living Color*. "Mmmhmm, that's when I first saw him. That's why working with him or being in a movie with him is every actor's dream, because I grew up watching him and he became this superstar from there. But, he's also an incredible person to be around. We all had dinner like, two weeks ago, and he's incredibly grateful for the support this film has had, because he really hasn't done a film in a really long time. He just kept saying, 'We are so blessed.' And I just took that in; he's still grateful at this point in his career," she muses.

Presently, *Sonic* is the second highest-grossing film of 2020. And to think, *Sonic* almost missed its mark. After *Sonic's* first trailer (in 2019) received negative reviews, the studio delayed the film three months to do a redesign. "I'm super surprised that Paramount actually listened to the people. People who are superfans of *Sonic*, they know *Sonic*, and they know the world. And they [Paramount] listened, which *does not* happen in our industry... And it was probably the best thing they did, because it's #1 two weeks in a row," says Tika.

Recently, Tika wrapped up the filming of the first season of ABC's new TV series, *Mixed-ish*. When the trailer for this sitcom first debuted, I was intrigued. The prequel spin-off of *Black-ish* chronicles Rainbow 'Bow' Johnson's early years and her experience growing up in a mixed-race family in the 1980s and her family's assimilation from the hippie commune to the suburbs. Tika plays Alicia Johnson, a mother of three (Bow, Johan, and Santamonica) and a lawyer, who works for her father-in-law, played by Gary Cole. Mark-Paul Gosselaar portrays Alicia's husband, Paul Johnson.

"Alicia is a very smart, but vulnerable, very free, and open woman, who is kinda quirky and silly --that's kinda where Bow gets her quirkiness and her not-so-great dancing moves. It's a role that I'm so grateful that I was able to get, and that Kenya Barris [creator of *Black-ish* and *Grown-ish*] saw parts of Alicia in me enough to say, 'Can you come read for the role?' It's part of this really cool universe, which not only tells something funny, but is also socially impactful --you learn something, but without being beat over the head. I'm just grateful to be part of this planet, of the *-ish* universe," says Tika.

I've been watching *Mixed-ish* since its premiere and have fallen in love with the Johnsons. The entire cast is bursting

with personality, especially the youngest Johnson, Santamonica, aka Santi, portrayed by Mykal-Michelle Harris. Santi is unbelievably sassy and hilarious. “Oh my God, she’s fantastic --all the kids are: Ethan William Childress, Arica Himmel, Mykal-Michelle Harris, they are so well cast and they deliver every time. They are part of this fantastic show, where I’m happy to play their mom.” Working with Mark-Paul every day has also been a pleasure. “We get along almost too well that I would keep looking over my shoulder like, *What’s going to happen in Season Two?* ’cause we get along so well. We’re neighbors actually [in Los Angeles]. We didn’t even know until we started working together. He’s such a thoughtful actor, he’s a family guy, and he’s just *nice*. And he’s grateful to still be in the business, after all this time, to be working, so I feel like he teaches me something every day. He also directs. Hopefully, he’ll direct an episode of our show.”

With *Mixed-ish* set in the '80s, Tika and the cast get to dive into the extreme fashion of this era. “The clothes are fantastic. The makeup is amazing --just the colors, the tone, the essence of what was going on that time socially. There were big changes in the '80s, going into the '90s, so it’s just fun to play around with that.” ABC recently announced that *Mixed-ish* will be returning for a second season. “It’s overwhelming because you want to live up to what these two [*Black-ish* and *Grown-ish*] have done success-wise. But I feel like we’ve created our own little hub of what we are and we kinda had to because we’re pre what you see now. The take is, we’re the reason why Bow is Bow, y’know what I mean? We’re the family you get to see pre everything you see now, so it’s exciting to create that.”

In addition to acting, Tika has been producing and developing her own projects. In 2016, Tika co-produced with John Legend, her first film, *Southside with You*. In the film (an official selection of the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, which was sold to Miramax), Tika portrays former first lady Michelle Obama. What was it like playing Michelle? “It was amazing. What I loved was we weren’t trying to emulate them or who they are right now, we had to imagine who they were through books and through her brother’s book... We didn’t have a lot of love stories with

black people as the leads at that time. I just thought it was interesting to dissect their first date, and everybody can kinda see themselves in that.” Did Michelle comment on it? “She didn’t. I was like, *Oh my God, did she hate it?*” Tika laughs. “I know we got the thumbs-up to do it... and there wasn’t going to be any backlash. I understand though, it’s hard to... your relationship is on-screen and somebody’s taking that and putting it up there, you don’t... so, I don’t know. One day, when I see her, I’ll ask her,” she says with a smile.

Southside with You was Tika’s first producing credit, but she had been laying the groundwork for its success for a while now. “I always tell people, little nuggets of life experience and things that don’t work, all add up... I tried to produce a long time ago, a surfing thing; my ex was a pro surfer. And I just found these videos of me putting money into it, and having a videographer, so I’ve always wanted to do it. It’s like, all those bad times or things that didn’t work out lead to the thing that you were supposed to be doing --that’s what you worked for. Yeah, producing is like, my thing, man.” Tika smiles. She relishes taking a small idea and bringing it to fruition. Being on the ground --obtaining the financing, making it all work, producing stories that wouldn’t otherwise get seen -- is a thrill for her. Once Tika had a taste of producing, she knew she wanted to do more. “You also have a seat at the table, where you’re like, ‘Mmm, I don’t believe that’s right’ or just trying to make it the best it can be and having a say in the creative.”

Right now, Tika has a few irons in the fire. “I have something I’m working on with Amy Poehler that we’re producing together. A few writers I’m excited to work with. Some original ideas. I am about to sell my script that I wrote with my co-writer, Kay Oyegun --she’s an amazing writer. Just keep pushing it forward,” she says with a smile. The movie script is a dramedy in the vein of *The Farewell* with laughter, she tells me. The themes are sisterhood and family. “Just something that’s really close to my heart.” Tika finished writing it last year on her birthday (June 20) while she was in Hawaii. “It was just something I couldn’t stop, because it’s a story that just needed to get out. It was also a healing thing, too. It turned out to be something

fantastic that people really love, so I’m excited about it,” she beams.

With the United States under a stay-at-home order for the last couple of months, Tika has been quarantining with her fiancé and *The Haves and the Have Nots* co-star, Nicholas James and their daughter, Ella. Fortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic hasn’t affected Tika’s momentum. In late March, Tika and her partner Thai Randolph (EVP and General Manager of Kevin Hart and Lionsgate’s Laugh Out Loud network) launched two new businesses: lifestyle ecommerce site, SugaBerry (SugaBerry.com) and The Suga podcast via Stitcher.

“It’s like the Goop for black moms,” says Tika about SugaBerry. The idea for SugaBerry [“Like grandmas in the south: ‘Gimme some suga’ --kisses.”] materialized while Tika was pregnant with Ella. “It’s kinda correlated to the book I’m turning into a movie with Amy Poehler ‘cause I was looking for a space or a community of just mamas or brown mamas online... I found small ones later, after digging... I just felt like there was a hole missing from the marketplace where people were not paying attention to this group of women who are highly-educated, that have money to spend, and who are not being catered to luxury-wise or mid-luxury-wise.” Tika pitched her idea to Thai, who was like, “Let’s do it!”

Tika is very involved with SugaBerry. “Thai is like, ‘I’ve seen so many different celebrity-endorsed things or people who start companies and they’re not very involved, but you are so involved in *everything*.’ I just want to make sure it’s something that I also would love,” says Tika when we connect a second time in mid-May via phone. “It’s almost like when I give gifts; I like to give gifts that I would want and not send back or return. So, I just want to make sure that we’re giving information, and giving the sweetness of life with things that I love as well. Even during COVID, we’ve been able to put resources up, whether it’s about our stimulus checks, things to do with your kids at home, taking care of yourself, raising a kid in the TikTok generation, to the indulgence of being everything to everyone. The indulgence of talking about the conversations that need to be had. It’s happening, it’s all happening, so we’re excited.”

On The Suga podcast, a branch of SugaBerry, Tika and Thai interview experts and celebrity guests. “The Suga talks about all things motherhood, or if you’re undecided or an auntie or want to get in on the fun. Things that we don’t always get to talk about or be in the conversation about, especially for black women or women of color, in general. We don’t spill the tea, we share the suga.” Kelly Rowland, Vivica A. Fox, and Tia Mowry are just a few of The Suga’s past guests. “We’re thriving and surviving and lifting people up in the meantime,” says Tika. “We launched this whole business while this quarantine situation happened. It’s going great, man. It’s also been therapeutic for me and Thai because we’re never home this much, we’re either on set or in meetings and things like that. Being home, consumed by your child and your husband, basically, everything’s home, so it’s just been very therapeutic to kinda be validated by other women in feeling... whether it’s the pressures... or spending more time with your family or working on your own relationship even more. It’s just brought things more to the forefront, so it’s been very therapeutic.” They also provide a wealth of resources for mental health, wellness, parenting, love, etc. “It’s just been very, very cool to do in the midst of all this. We have a great list of amazing people that are lined up for a second season. We’re super excited that people want to come on and share their story and share their resources, so we can all remain connected.”

Even though Tika is home, she is busier than ever and has been taking meeting after meeting and reading a ton of scripts. “I’m excited to start pitching some things. It’s crazy, because all the writers are home, so they’re all able to work on their day jobs, but also the other stuff they’ve been developing, so all these scripts I’ve been developing have been coming in, which has been super exciting.” Tika has also been recording her voiceover work for TBS’ animated space opera series, *Final Space*, from home. “I’ve been working like a crazy person. I feel like I’m more busy at home than I am in the street! It’s insane. It’s definitely kept my mind off all the craziness that’s been happening around us. Just trying to focus on positivity.” **ML**

Keep up with Tika on Instagram: @TikaSumpter, SugaBerry.com (Instagram: @TheSugaBerries), Twitter: @IamTikaSumpter, and The Suga podcast.

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Photo Credit: DeWayne Rogers



“I love roller coasters. I love the Disney Cruise, seriously. I told myself I would never go on a cruise and I went on that and it changed my world. It’s so good, it’s so clean, and the food is delicious. And, they’re not paying me for this. I think I sold the Disney Cruise to so many people because I was so impressed. I didn’t even have a kid at that time. I went with my family and I was like, ‘I don’t want to go.’ I had my own room and everything and I was like, ‘Yo! What is this?’ I started telling everybody and they were like, *We’re going to go!* And I’m like, *Maybe they should be paying me now,*” she says with a laugh. Have you taken your daughter, Ella? “I haven’t yet. I’ll take her next year for sure. Disney, hook it up,” she laughs.

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Do you ever get out to Miami?

“I’ve been to Miami once. I think I didn’t know what to expect. Oh, everybody’s in shape? I’m going to put my towel back on.” She laughs. “Um, that’s the Miami I saw. I was like, ‘Holy hell.’ And I stayed at, what is that hotel? It’s a very snazzy hotel. It’s huge, blue...” Fontainebleau? “I stayed there and I felt so, again, this is my introverted...” She gasps. “I don’t know if I belong here,” she whimpers. “It was just so big and all the women were just gorgeous and the men were like, y’know.... But I need to go there now. I need to do Miami-Miami. I need to go to that really famous club that everybody goes to, that people can’t get into.” LIV? “LIV. Is that still good? I feel like I need to do Miami --go to all the restaurants, party, and go to the pool. Once I workout more, I think I’ll go back,” she laughs.

What are you watching on TV?

“Semi-ashamed and semi-not, ‘cause I’m on a set all the time, sometimes you just need a getaway from... not that I need to make an excuse for what I’m watching, but I’m like, I can’t watch another movie. I don’t want to watch anything. I just want to watch reality TV. I just want to watch *90 Day Fiancé*. I’m hooked on this show. I tell people about it like I tell them about this Disney Cruise. Whoever created that show is a genius, that’s my show.”

What artists are you listening to?

“So, I have Spotify now... so late to everything. I love the new Justin Bieber album. He has this one song. I have to put this out, I couldn’t stop listening to it. I always think of when they’re singing, I’m like, I’m in the video. I’m like, Oh my God, that’s such a sweet song, like, he’s talking about me. But I don’t care if it’s him, you just feel like that girl, y’know? It’s just such a good song. It’s not “Yummy,” it’s the other song that’s probably really popular. But anyway, I like his song, I thought it was really cute.”

You did a music video.

“I have. I did one with Jason Derulo,” she sings his name and laughs.

How was it doing that?

“I did Jason Derulo’s “It Girl” and then I did a video with Mos Def a long time ago with the black girl who is in *The Bronx Tale*. It was such a good set. I was like, Oh, I don’t mind doing this again. I was Jason Derulo’s It Girl; this is when I was on *Gossip Girl*. It’s like a love story. It was fun,” she laughs. “Super sweet guy.”

Photo Courtesy ABC