

Her Inner Light

Abigail Spencer is a star that shines onscreen and from within

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE · PHOTO CREDIT: STEVEN LIPPMAN

Abigail Spencer is radiant—from her luminescent porcelain complexion to her energy, which is as vibrant as the geometric patterned Andrew Gn shift dress she is wearing. I am sitting with the dark-haired beauty, whose hair is pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of her neck, inside The Library Bar in The Nomad Hotel in New York City. The daughter of Yancy Spencer III (the godfather of Gulf Coast surfing), Abigail could have easily grown up to be a world-class pro surfer, but her singer-songwriter-skincare-line-representative mother, wouldn't allow it because of the risk of developing skin cancer. "That's why I became a dancer, a singer and an actor—is because of my mom!" exclaims the actress known for her roles on television's *Suits*, *Mad Men*, *Rectify*, *True Detective*, *Burning Love*, and films *This Is Where I Leave You*, *Chasing Mavericks*, *Cowboys & Aliens*.

The Gulf Breeze, ("Florabama") Florida-native is in NYC with her 6-year-old son Roman to promote the television shows she's currently starring in: *Rectify* and *True Detective*. "He's [Roman] never been to New York. I'm like, 'You're going to love New York!'" she says enthusiastically. "Like, you better love New York or you're not my son!" She laughs. In two days, they have already taken in three Broadway shows: *An American in Paris*, *Finding Neverland*, and *Aladdin*. "I forgot how much I loved the Disney movie [*Aladdin*]. When I was my son's age, I had memorized the entire soundtrack... I'm 'A whole new world...'" she sings the verse pitch perfect, "And Roman's like, 'cause he hasn't seen the movie yet, 'Mom, how do you know all these songs?' So, now we're going to go watch the movie, which is pretty cool."

A waiter pours Abigail a taste of the rosé she ordered. She motions for him to continue pouring. "I trust you," she says with a laugh. "I feel good about it. Do you want a glass of rosé?" she asks me. Sure, I reply. Fresh off vacationing in Provence and Paris, her first time, Abigail is still on a Parisian high. "I'm like, 'Give it to me. Give it to me. Yeah, yeah, France,

France, Paris, Paris!' as much as I can get in me. 'Give it to me, rosé!'" She lifts her wine glass to toast with me. "Cheers! In Paris everyone drinks rosé. Paris, Provence, Monte Carlo, everyone was drinking rosé. I was like, 'I found my people.'"

Rectify, on SundanceTV, is presently in its third season, and has been picked up for a fourth season that will begin shooting in Georgia next April. "Rectify is a very authentic, southern show about a man [Daniel] who has been on death row for 19 years, then through DNA evidence coming to light because of my character's dedication, is released." Abigail plays Daniel's sister, Amantha, who has come to the realization of how co-dependent she is on her brother. "This is a girl who is very intelligent and educated and she's working at Thrifty Town in her hometown." *Rectify* and Abigail have received rave reviews. "I would do *Rectify* as long as they would let us. It's such a fabulous show and I just don't know if I'll ever get reviews and support like this. I'm like, 'Enjoy now, kid, 'cause it's all downhill from here,'" she laughs.

Abigail is also on HBO's hit television series, *True Detective*, playing Gena, Colin Farrell's character's ex-wife. Season two of *True Detective* is a completely new storyline with a completely new cast—which is part of the show's appeal, Abigail tells me. "I felt really honored that Nic [Pizzolatto] trusted me with Colin Farrell, because he is a fantastic actor, so the fact that he's like, 'I trust you to get in the ring with him,' is tremendous." I point out that she has worked with an enviable list of great leading men. She giggles. "Yeah, I have. Haven't I? I know, I was reminiscing about all my fellas," she says with a smile. I list them off: Gerard Butler, Daniel Craig, Jason Bateman... She chimes in with, "Michael Vartan, Luke Kirby, James Franco... Yeah, I just get to work with great actors," she laughs. And quite handsome ones, I add.

Having worked with such seasoned actors has been a great learning experience for her. "Every leading man that I've worked with has made me

better 'cause they're so good. I learned a lot from Daniel [Craig], who is a really technically strong actor... I just learned so much about how to be even more still in your work. Jon Hamm taught me so much. I hadn't seen *Mad Men* when I started working with him, so I couldn't be like, 'Jon Hamm!'" she says in swoony voice. "I couldn't lose my mind 'cause I didn't know who he was. But the thing I geeked out about even more about Jon is when I saw him host *Saturday Night Live*. I was like, 'Oh my god, he's so funny!' We are both *Saturday Night Live* freaks, so I got a little weak in the knees when I found out about that, I will say. But Jon helped me stay very calm and still and was just always so there for me. And [James] Franco's been an ongoing creative partner. We've made three, maybe even four shorts and films and other movies. He's become a buddy, for sure."

James and Abigail met on *OZ the Great and Powerful*. "I was there for the first two months of shooting. James is just so interested. He's always in school, taking classes. He just finished film school at the time and I was very interested in making more movies, so we connected over that. And he's also just so willing. 'Oh, you'd like to do that? Then we should do that.' He's just someone who leads with yes, which is so inspiring. If he says he's going to do it, he does it. It's an amazing quality." The two are working on the film *Wrong Number* together, which has been through several incarnations. "I hope we get to do it at some point. He's like, 'Abby, when are we doing that? When are we doing that?'" However, both actors are busy with other side projects.

Right now, Abigail is trying to figure out how to be a working actor as well as create and write on other projects. Born into a creative home, Abigail wrote poems, songs and stories growing up. "My mom found me in my room one day and I had hundreds of pages all over the floor and I'm like, 'Mother, don't come in, I'm organizing my first novel.' I had written this whole war story, I was like

Favorite Florida Memory

“ Definitely going to the beach with my dad, my dad was a professional surfer, so he had this whole ritual. We’d get all our towels together,” she says in soft, nostalgic tone, “all of our beach stuff and put it, he had a surf van, he owned surf shops along the Gulf Coast called Innerlight Surf Shop. So, we get in the surf van and drive over the bridge to the beach. Then, we’d go out and take our snacks and sit on the beach for an hour, and watch the waves and we’d talk, or not talk. And then he’d be like, ‘O.K., it’s time to go out.’ So we’d go back to the van and get our wetsuits on and get our boards and we’d go out and surf for a couple of hours.... My dad always made a special effort. That’s my favorite memory — just doing that with him. ”

More on Abigail

What would fans be surprised to find about you?

"I love popcorn so much. My boyfriend [Josh Pence] has a secret recipe and it is unbelievable. I'm like, "Baby, pleeeeeease, pretty please can we make popcorn and watch a movie?" I'm addicted. I have to take breaks from popcorn eating. It's so good. I'm like a super snob about popcorn."

What are you listening to right now?

"I'm listening to Leon Bridges like a madwoman on repeat. He's my favorite. I'm kinda a diehard Sia fan, and Patrick Watson. For my boyfriend's birthday, I took him to a Patrick Watson concert at the Hollywood Cemetery in L.A., which was super cool."

Hidden talents?

"I'm a really good mimic, like I can mimic someone's voice, mannerisms and tone pretty well if I meet them. I was on *The View* today, so I remember Raven-Symoné's mannerisms and the way she sounded, so I could probably mimic her later—but only in private. Mimicry is the greatest form of flattery... I can mimic Valerie Cherish from *The Comeback* pretty well actually. I can do a really good Valerie Cherish."

What are you watching on TV?

"I watch *The Knick*, *Girls*, *Togetherness*, *The Comeback*, *Veep*—I just love those shows. I really love all the shows I'm on right now. I really like *Suits*, loved *Mad Men*. I'm really happy I like the stuff I'm working on," she laughs.

The best part about acting?

"I literally get to take on someone else's psyche, empathy, life story, background and that makes me so much more empathic as a human being and to other people. I get to learn so many things that I would never have learned otherwise... In *The Sweet Life*, I play a woman who is going to kill herself, so living in that psyche and understanding someone who gets to that point gave me empathy for suicide... I just think it's the greatest gift; I get to learn and feel. It's not just a head thing—it's an actual heart thing. It's just made me a much better human."

If you weren't in entertainment, what do you think you'd be doing?

"I hope I'd be doing some sort of charity work. I'm really touched, because my boyfriend is the International Ambassador for Mercy Corps, which is a disaster and relief aid organization. We get to tour these nonprofits that are changing the world and we're like, 'Ohmygosh, we have to quit our jobs and join.' They're like, 'No! Please don't. You get to shine a light on what we're doing. You're our partner or megaphone.'" [Abigail is involved with the Uganda Project, St. Jude's, The Art of Elysium and Charity Water. For her upcoming birthday, Abigail plans to do a blast and ask friends to donate the age she's turning to Charity Water in lieu of gifts.]

10," she explains. She didn't show anyone her writing until she was in her mid-20s, and that piece was *Teach*, a one-hour teen drama written with writing partner-friend Lauren Miller. (The pilot was sold to ABC Family, but wasn't picked up, so they're trying to find it a new home.)

Abigail took a year off from acting to write music, and has a hundred songs to show for it. She has a couple of half-hour realistic comedies in the works, a show in development, a script Mark Johnson (*Rectify*, *Chasing Mavericks*) is producing, and has written a movie she'd like to direct. "Only 9% of the DGA is women. I mean that's preposterous. I've been telling stories professionally about 17 years now, so I kinda feel responsible." She counts James and friend Lake Bell as examples of actors doing both very well.

A couple of years ago, Abigail wrote a beautifully candid piece for the *Huffington Post* about the *Chasing Mavericks* premiere, and the act of showing up for love and in general. It was a very challenging time for the actress as her father had recently passed away and she was also going through a divorce. How has life changed since that time? I ask. "This fall would probably be three years ago. I've done a lot of growing up. I've done a lot

of grief recovery work, so I feel more connected to my grief. The first two years it was hard to feel human. I was like, 'I'm just going to do it anyway. I don't feel it, but I'm going to show up.' The *Chasing Mavericks* audition, I was 2 ½ hours late 'cause I was going through a really hard time and I didn't want to go. My manager literally pulled me out of bed... I've found someone I'm very deeply in love with and I've had a lot of healing the past few years. But missing my dad never goes away. Part of who I am is missing my dad, losing him in a really, really sudden way. But I'm learning to be more complete with it and use it in other capacities. I definitely don't stuff it down, for sure. I'm just more in touch with it."

Sharing her feelings on such a deeply sensitive subject reveals what a strong, positive and sincerely open person Abigail truly is. In the hour that we chat over our glasses of wine, she is a bright light of optimism—a trait ingrained in her by her parents. "My parents had a very, very deep faith, very spiritual people. It stems from that environment, a really deep faith and spiritual, positive and hopeful, purposeful outlook on life. But I was really tested with it the past five years, so I have had to learn tools. A huge part of that is surrounding myself with people who are very supportive. I have such incredible

friends who are just so positive... I rely very heavily on the people I choose as my friends. And being a mom, it changes you for the better." Not long after she says this, her son appears and jumps into her lap. "Will you introduce yourself quick before you leave?" she asks him. "This is Roman." "Hi!" he says. "We're working on eye contact, right?" "Yes, we are," he replies before running off with the woman he came in with. "And he's off. He's very independent. I was too. I still am. Being a working mom is hard, I will say that. It is not easy."

Abigail has proven that she possesses the strength to tackle anything that comes her way. What has served her well is her philosophy in life to just show up. "Whatever state you're in, bring everything to the table. You don't have to put yourself together to show up. I learned a lot about that through my dad's death 'cause nothing is ever the same. And I was, am still could be a wreck, a mess, but to show up anyway, and not be afraid of that. I think that's been the biggest life lesson, particularly in the past four years. I don't have to put myself together, but I do need to show up." Wise words from a woman whose soul is as deep as the ocean and whose inner light is as bright as the Florida sun. **ML**