

ALL SHE
Desires

IN WINNING THE BROADWAY ROLE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' FRAGILE CHARACTER BLANCHE, NICOLE ARI PARKER GOT THE PART OF A LIFETIME — AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE HER OWN FEELINGS ABOUT AGING AND DEPENDENCE.

more



AT FIRST, IT WOULD SEEM these two women could not be more different: Nicole Ari Parker, the TV and film actor whose star is on the rise, and Blanche Dubois, the character in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a fading Southern belle, whose nervous instability and hard luck are about to take her down.

But Parker the actor is discovering their common ground as she prepares for her Broadway debut as Blanche in a multiracial production of the classic American play that opens April 22 at the Broadhurst Theatre. "Every character is so dense and tightly woven," says Parker. "Blanche is verbose; her language takes you on an emotional journey. She is tremendously strong and clear and unrelenting in her view of the world. When I read the lines I feel very empowered. She holds her ground!"

Parker, 41, will be playing opposite Blair Underwood as Stanley; Daphne Rubin-Vega is playing Stella. Most of the cast met up in New Orleans last year to





OH, BABY!

Nicole Ari Parker was born and raised in Baltimore and attended a private girls' school there.



LET'S BOOGIE

Parker appeared in the 1997 film *Boogie Nights* with Burt Reynolds, Mark Wahlberg, Julianne Moore and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

visit Williams' home and the French Quarter setting of *Streetcar* and to meet Williams scholar Kenneth Holditch, Ph.D.

Parker is perhaps best known as the sexy, smart Teri Joseph in Showtime's hit series *Soul Food*, which ran from 2000–2004 and in which she played opposite her now-husband Boris Kodjoe. Parker also appeared in the ABC drama series *The Deep End*, and co-starred with Kodjoe in the UPN series *Second Time Around*. She has been in a number of films, including *Boogie Nights*, *Remember the Titans*, *Sebastian Cole* and *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins*.

Nominated seven times for NAACP Image Awards, Parker says she is humbled to be chosen to play Blanche in *Streetcar*, which will be directed by the award-winning theater director Emily Mann. "It's a dream come true," Parker says.

Ready or Not

FOR PARKER, THE NEW ORLEANS FIELD TRIP with *Streetcar*'s cast resonated with her education as an actor at New York University's Tisch

School of the Arts under the well-known acting teacher Tony Greco. "He believed if you're going to do Chekov, you need to know the history of Russia," she says with a laugh. "He demanded that we live truthfully in imaginary circumstances — no easy task!"

Parker becomes tearful when describing how she called her former teacher to tell him about her opportunity to play Blanche Dubois. Upon hearing Parker's news Greco said, "You're ready."

But Parker wondered. "I thought, 'Am I the right age to play Blanche, an aging Southern belle?'" Then, laughing, she says, "With my eyelash extensions, I don't feel old!"

Turning serious, Parker enumerates the differences between herself and Blanche: "I'm a modern woman, a mom of two kids; I've got my coffee, boots and jeans. She has outfits, gloves. This was when women took time to put themselves together."

Born in Baltimore, Parker says she is recalling her parents' ways to understand Blanche better. "My mother and dad's generation, they treasured things. A suitcase, silk slippers, gloves



for church, hats kept in boxes,” she says.

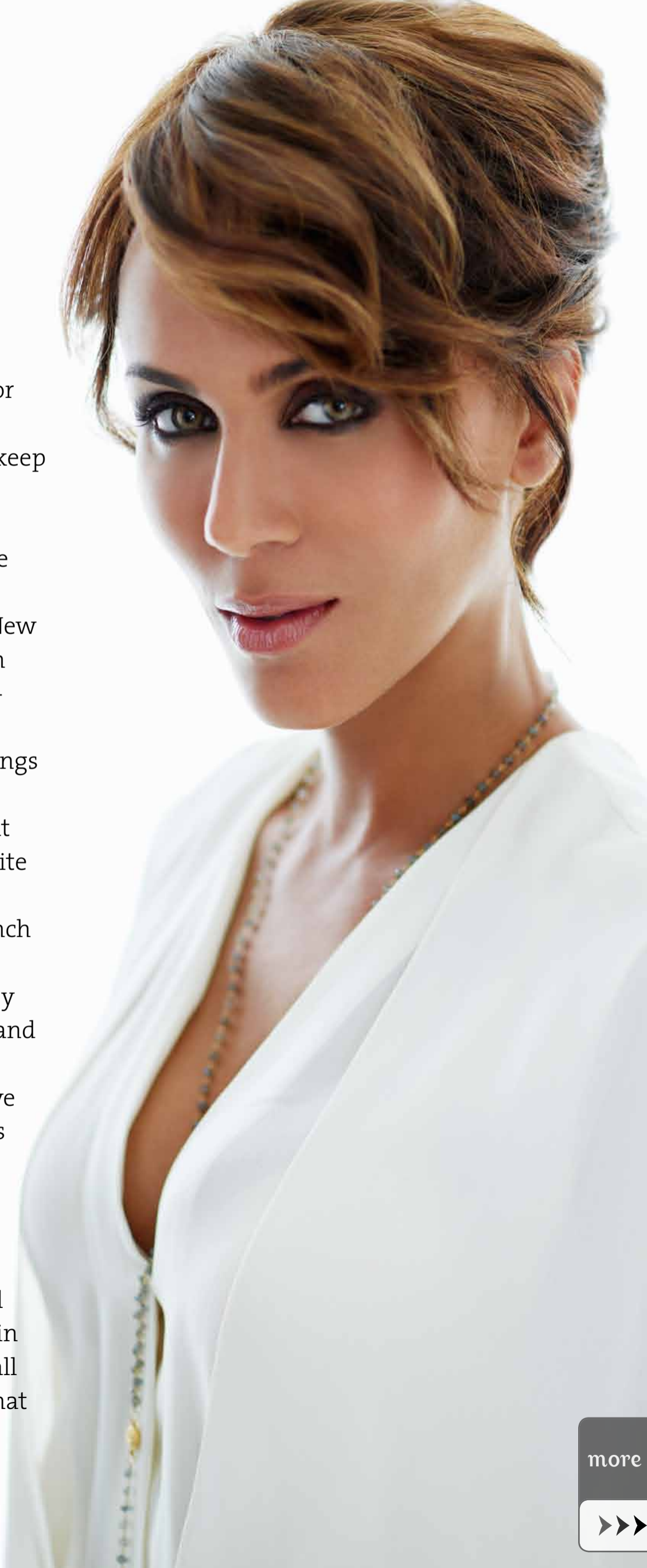
“I went to Roland Park Country School [for girls] in Baltimore, where I wore a uniform. My father taught me to iron my shirts and keep my shoes shined. I have to draw on that.”

As Parker prepares for the role, director Mann notes how perfect she is for it: “Nicole brings that sense of class to the role. There could have been DuBois people of color in New Orleans, fair-skinned descendants of French Huguenots who were upper-class and well-educated,” says Mann.

“As an African-American woman, she brings another kind of rhythm, and an enormous amount of strength. It’s a strong new look at the role, as it is for Stanley too. The only white people are the people next door. The rest of the cast is Latino and Caribbean, as the French Quarter was.”

In the play, Blanche Dubois is damaged by a past that includes the suicide of her husband after she discovers him with another man. She’s had to compromise herself, just to have a roof over her head. And she’s aging. This is an emotional factor that both Parker and Mann relate to personally.

“You come to a certain point in your life when you’re no longer young,” says Mann. “Men don’t look at you anymore as a sexual being, you’re past that. I understand the pain of looking at the mirror. This is something all women understand. Nicole is just nailing that in such a moving way.”



No Biz Like Show Biz

PARKER IS ACUTELY AWARE THAT PROFESSIONAL acting can be a harsh environment for women. “It’s hard because it’s not show *art* but show *business*, and learning how to do this business, it’s a secondary craft, and that side of it will let you down,” Parker says. “For some actresses I know the light in their eyes is now flickering instead of blazing. The industry can beat you up.”

About three years ago, Parker says she felt a weariness about it all. “Luckily, I have a strong spiritual background, an incredible husband, two wonderful children. It is show *art* and I’m not going to let the second set of skills for the business kill the art.” So whenever she could, she took roles that fed her artistically. “Doing that made me strong enough and sensitive enough to do Blanche.”

Parker and Kodjoe are a striking couple: She is tall and slender, with creamy brown skin and light brown eyes, and her husband is a former model and pro tennis player. While they are both dedicated to their careers, they also are devoted to their children. Soon after the birth of their daughter, Sophie, in 2005, they were devastated to learn that she had spina bifida, a birth defect of the spinal column that varies in the severity of its symptoms; for Sophie, it means that her bladder does not function normally.

- “I grew up fast,” Parker says of the months after Sophie’s diagnosis. “We went from being
- this sexy couple coming off a hit series to being



MATTHEW JORDAN SMITH/CORBIS OUTLINE

LOVE STORY

Parker and Kodjoe shared some steamy scenes in the hit TV series *Soul Food*.





like paramedics. It was hovering, waiting and watching, all day, every day.” Today, at age 6, Sophie is energetic and healthy, although she still needs to be catheterized to clear her bladder.

The couple created [Sophie’s Voice Foundation](#) to raise awareness about spina bifida, to support families with children who are born with it and to encourage pregnant women to take 400 micrograms or more of folic acid daily, which has been proven to help prevent the neural tube defect. Parker created a stylish headband called the [Save Your Do Gym Wrap](#) for women who exercise. Ten percent of proceeds will go to Sophie’s Voice.

Parker and Kodjoe also have a son, Nicolas, 5, who was born healthy. So their family life in Los Angeles includes a busy schedule of school, soccer, ballet lessons and mealtimes.

Dual Roles

PARKER’S HUSBAND, WHO HAS appeared in such films as *The Gospel*, *Brown Sugar* and *Resident Evil: Afterlife*, is soon to appear in the fifth *Resident Evil* film. He also starred in the TV series *Undercovers*. Kodjoe enjoys working with his wife and praises her skill as an actor: “She layers her characters like no one else,” he says. “She is unpredictable, very subtle and nuanced. She can be strong and vulnerable at the same time, and that’s what makes her work so colorful and full of substance.”

The fact that they’re in the same profession creates a foundation of understanding and



SPOTLIGHT ON SPINA BIFIDA

Nicole Ari Parker and her husband founded Sophie's Voice to raise funds for research and prevention of the birth defect spina bifida.

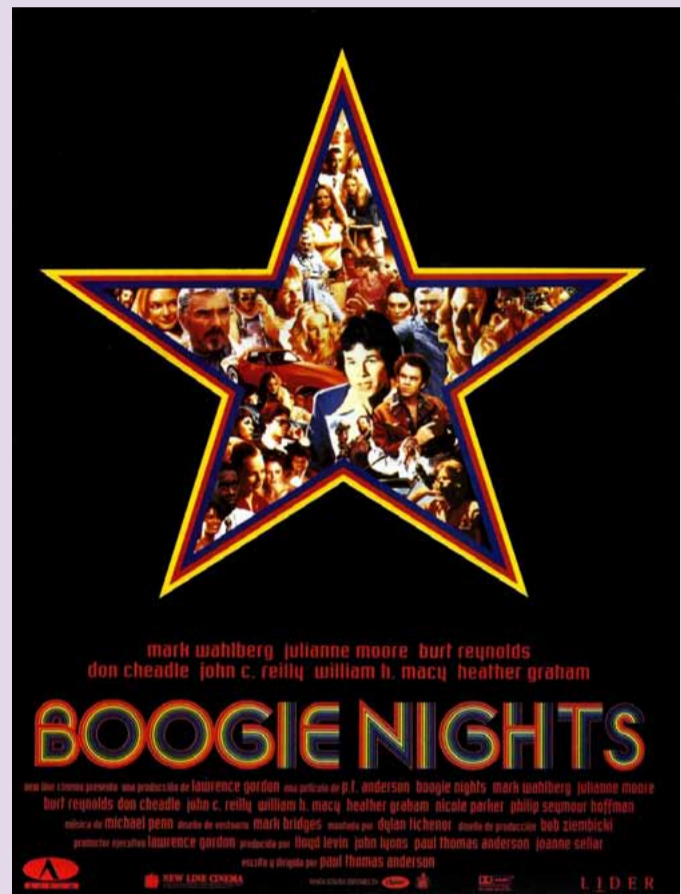
mutual support. "It helps us understand each other's obstacles," says Kodjoe. "We're dealing with Hollywood, we're in the same boat and sympathetic to each other's issues and challenges. The downside is that we have to be away from each other sometimes for work — it's up to us to prioritize."

Blanche Dubois, on the other hand, only has her sister Stella as family and their relationship is strained to a breaking point as the play reaches its devastating conclusion. As Blanche is taken away to what we assume is a mental hospital for the rest of her life, she tries, above all, to keep her dignity.

"The greatest gift of getting to play the role of Blanche Dubois is that it's reminded me to never give up," says Parker. "No matter if you get knocked down, stretched to your limit, lost your light and 20 very real years go by. And in some way I think that is the tragic beauty of Blanche. Even at the end, after all she has endured, she, in her own special way, doesn't give up."

STYLING Karen Marsala **HAIR** Tiffany Daugherty/Epiphany
MAKEUP Astrid Reyes **MANICURIST** Melanie McCulley

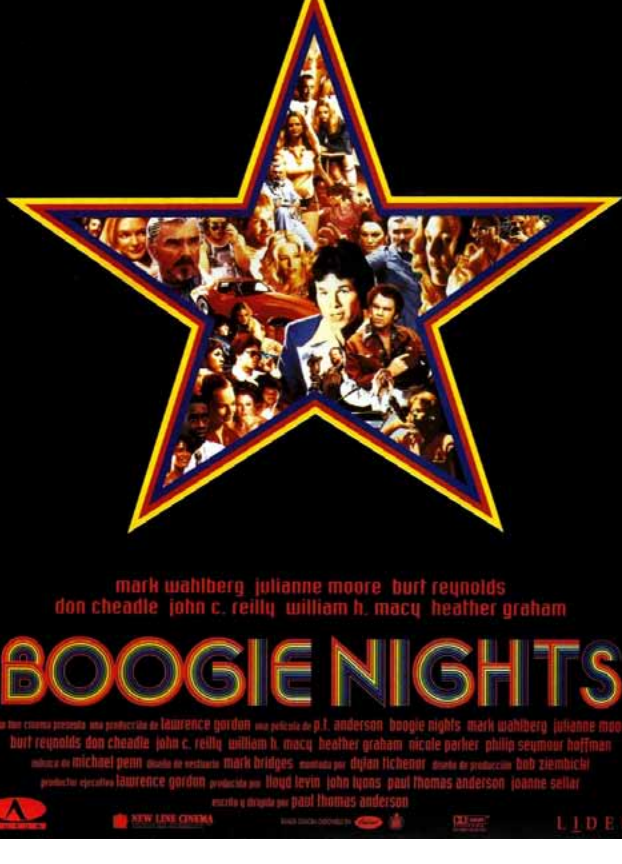
Nicole Ari Parker's Favorites



Movies

"I love so many different ones: *Boogie Nights*, *Annie*, *Sophie's Choice*, *Lady Sings the Blues*, *Ponyo*, *The Princess and the Frog*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Dancing in September*, *The Fighter*."





mark wahlberg julianne moore burt reynolds
don cheadle john c. reilly william h. macy heather graham

BOOGIE NIGHTS

una due cinema presenta una produzione di laurence gordon una pellicola di p. t. anderson boogie nights mark wahlberg julianne moore
burt reynolds don cheadle john c. reilly william h. macy heather graham nicole parker philip seymour hoffman
musica di michael penn monty de vestro mark bridges monty per dylan tichenor aiuto di produzione bob zimbich
produttore esecutivo laurence gordon produttore p. t. anderson john lyons paul thomas anderson joanne sellar
montaggio e montaggio per paul thomas anderson

NEW LINE CINEMA
L I D E R

Movies

“I love so many different ones:
*Boogie Nights, Annie, Sophie’s
Choice, Lady Sings the Blues, Ponyo,
The Princess and the Frog,
A Woman Under the Influence,
Dancing in September, The Fighter.*”



Cosmetics

“I’m really into [Youngblood \[Mineral\] Cosmetics](#) right now.
Natural and stays on. Rich color.
Also [Bare Escentuals](#).”



Designers

“There are too many to
name. But last time I gasped,
it was for the white
dress by Chloé that I wore for
the [VIV] shoot.”



Vacation Spot

“Ghana, with my husband.”

VAN MORRISON *Into the Music*



Music

“Vivaldi in the morning,
DMX while working out, Van
Morrison while cooking
dinner and Maimouna Youssef
after kids are asleep.”