

BREAST CANCER THREAT
Black Women Can't Ignore

TYLER PERRY
Must-See New Movie

ESSENCE

Fix Your Cash Crunch

8 ways to cut costs & make extra money

>>SPECIAL SURVEY

WHY MEN STRAY-OR STAY

3,000 Black Men Tell All

EXCLUSIVE
Mo'Nique's Sex Abuse Secret
"I refuse to be a victim"

LOVE YOUR BODY
HEALTH PLAN
Get Fit, Feel Great

PLUS SIZE
FASHION GUIDE!

135 LOOKS TO FLATTER YOUR CURVES

\$3.99US \$4.99CAN



VISIT ESSENCE.COM OCTOBER 2008



HAIR, LAWRENCE DAVIS/KARLEE ARTIST, MAKEUP, RENEE GARNES/ART HOUSE MANAGEMENT, MANICURIST, DIDA RAY BROWN PRO, PROP STYLIST, ANDREA HUELSE

ATLAST

Mo'Nique is wearing a Tadashi gown, (clockwise from right hand) an Aretina Arte for Gold Expressions ring, a Gold Expressions bracelet, an Isaac Manevitz for Ben-Amun hammered cuff, an Aretina Arte for Gold Expressions cuff and her own ring. For details, see Where to Buy.



F R E E

Our guest editor Mo'Nique is earning early praise for her controversial role in a movie that made her cry and scream. Now the star talks to AUDREY EDWARDS about a painful family secret she has kept for 25 years—a secret that has led to a personal and professional breakthrough

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ANDREW MACPHERSON

Mo'Nique has always had some nerve. The nerve to come to Hollywood ten years ago, thinking she could make it big being Black and bold, fat and funny, sassy, sexy and damn proud of it all, thank you very much. The nerve to do raw, raunchy stand-up comedy, then cross over to TV sitcom fame without so much as an acting lesson, playing the irrepressible Nikki Parker on the hit show *The Parkers* for five years. The nerve to host a televised beauty pageant for big girls that became a ratings blockbuster and a charm-school reality show for round-the-way girls that gave some respect. Not to mention the nerve to do movies, both funny and serious; make documentaries, both sensitive and groundbreaking; and write best-selling books. The nerve to speak her mind, tell the truth, make us gasp, and crack us up. In other words, she had the nerve to become a star—on her own in-your-face terms.

Yet on this warm spring day in California's San Fernando Valley, Mo'Nique, now 40 and a star we thought we knew, is quiet. Hesitant. Nervous. We are in the family room of her large hacienda-style home, where she's stretched out on a plush L-shaped sofa, her back up against the pillows, legs crossed. While her outfit is quintessential Mo'Nique—a slinky, spaghetti-strap halter dress and sparkly sandals—she herself is oddly subdued, alternating between being cute and coquettish, and pensive and brooding. It is day two of our interview, and Mo'Nique is trying to work up the nerve to talk about a subject as foul as L.A. smog. It is a subject that not even she has the nerve to joke about—some things are just not funny.

At this moment, our favorite stand-up sister, the fearless and funny cutup, resembles a cornered, confused little girl who wishes she'd had the nerve 25 years ago to say publicly what she's about to say now. "As I'm sitting right here, right now, Miss Audrey, God is talking to my spirit," Mo'Nique says, fanning the air with her hands. "'No, no, you ain't,' it's saying. And I'm saying, 'Well, who am I protecting, and why?'" Suddenly, that little girl inside her blurts out: "I was molested by my older brother. And even when I confronted him and told my parents, he said I was lying, and nothing was really done." There. She has finally found the nerve to say it. And once said, the rest of the story comes tumbling out.

"WHY WOULD I LIE? WHY IS THERE EVEN AN IF IN THIS?"

The alleged abuse started when Mo'Nique was 7, and she says it continued until she was 11. She was the baby in the family, and her brother, the eldest child, was nearly ten years older than she. Mo'Nique says he molested her four times over the course of the next four years, after taking her into the

bathroom and giving her candy. When she was 15, she says she finally told her parents because something violent happened; she won't say what. (After numerous attempts, we could not reach Mo'Nique's mother for comment.)

What has finally prompted Mo'Nique to talk about the abuse is her chilling role in the new film *Push*, a gritty, harrowing tale of incest scheduled for release next year. It's the kind of role that takes nerve of a whole other sort, requiring the courage to look bad, act ugly, and get dirty. Based on the 1996 controversial novel of the same name by Sapphire and directed by Lee Daniels, who also helmed *Monster's Ball*, *Push* exposes unimaginable family dysfunction. Mo'Nique plays Mary Jones, a woman who sexually violates her own daughter—she forces her child to perform oral sex on her, beats her, makes her gorge on food—and lets her husband continue the abuse by raping their daughter, getting her pregnant twice. Mary personifies evil, and the early buzz is that Mo'Nique has given the performance of her career. It's being said that *Push* could do for her what *Monster's Ball* did for Halle Berry—earn her an Oscar.

Mo'Nique had to go to a personal place that was deep, painful and terrifying to summon the power she brought to her performance. She had to revisit her own painful history of incest, one that still elicits conflict over how she and her family handled the trauma of her older brother's abuse. "I'm not blaming my parents because me and my brother were both their children, and I just don't know the kind of position they felt they were in," she says, explaining their reaction when she first told them what her brother had done. "My father was very upset, but it never got mentioned again. I'll never forget my mother saying, 'If it's true, it will surface again,' and I remember thinking, *Why would I lie? Why is there even an if in this?*"

"WE'RE REAL PEOPLE, AND A LOT OF REAL PEOPLE GET MOLESTED"

Though Mo'Nique insists that she doesn't blame her parents, who had always adored her, she does say, "I was angry with them for so long, because I felt as if they should have seen what was happening." Yet Mo'Nique herself kept quiet, not wanting to further upset her family, and later, not wanting to be another celebrity with a sad story of pathology to tell. "It seems celebrities always come out with these stories," she says. "But we're real people, and a lot of real people get molested." Mo'Nique admits that a part of her even now is reluctant to speak publicly about her brother. "It makes me nervous," she says, "It's like, *Oh, God, what will it do to him when people read this?* And then another part of me is like, *Goddamn it, it's my obligation to let people know, and to tell women to watch their children.*" ▸

"I'M NOT EXCITED TO TALK ABOUT THIS, BUT I'VE HAD A LOT OF MEN BECAUSE I WANTED TO FEEL PROTECTED. I WANTED TO KNOW THAT THE ABUSE WOULD NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN."

Her role in *Push* led Mo'Nique to confront her own demons. The movie, though, is sure to incite the same kind of controversy and outrage as Sapphire's novel did when it was first published 12 years ago. Mo'Nique says she jumped at the chance to play Mary because director Daniels is known to elicit great performances from good actors by casting them against type and pushing them beyond their comfort level. "As her friend, I was afraid of casting her," says Daniels. "The character she plays is deplorable. The boldness and honesty that she brings to this character takes my breath away. She metamorphoses into an absolute beast. Sometimes I had to step away and do a double take, because I found myself completely not recognizing her." To that Mo'Nique adds, "My brother was a monster to me. When Lee would say 'Action,' I became my brother."

The notion of redemption is a recurring theme in much of Daniels's work, which frequently explores whether the darkest side of human nature can ever come into the light. "Lee would always ask me if I believed that anyone can be redeemed," Mo'Nique continues, "and I told him no." As far as she's concerned, there can be no redemption without remorse or an admission of guilt. "I've never gotten a genuine 'I'm sorry' from my brother. He still acts like he doesn't know what I'm talking about," she says angrily, suddenly lashing out as if her brother were in the room with us. "So screw hurting your feelings. You need to get your feelings hurt, and you need to get some help." Mo'Nique says what has haunted her almost as much as the abuse itself was her own silence in failing to speak up when her brother first molested her. "Because I never said anything—didn't go to the police or a counselor—my brother went on to do horrible things to someone else," she says. "He went on to sexually abuse another girl." That time, however, he was arrested, convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He is out of prison now—and out of Mo'Nique's life.

The breaking point, she says, came three years ago, right after she had given birth to her twin boys, David and Jonathan. Her husband, Sidney Hicks, and her mother and brother were in the hospital room visiting. "My mom put the twins in my brother's arms," Mo'Nique recalls, "and I suddenly thought, *I can't do this anymore. I can't pretend.* I didn't want to make a scene at the hospital, but when I got home I called my brother and said, 'You know what? If I never see you again in life, I'm okay. I wish you no harm, but I don't choose to ever deal with you again.' " She has not been in touch with him since. (After repeated attempts, we could not reach Mo'Nique's brother for comment.)

Mo'Nique pleads with parents to "please listen if your baby comes to you and says anything like 'I was uncomfortable with the way he looked at me or the way he touched me.' Listen to them. Molestation has a damaging effect." Mo'Nique says she has tried on several occasions to turn the pain of molestation into humor, but never could. What has helped her deal is therapy, something she says she "was too embarrassed to do because I was always told it was a White woman's thing. But therapy for me has been beautiful because I'm learning not to be a victim." She now recognizes that many of her relationships have been shaped by her sexual abuse. Many were with men she felt she could control—to keep from being abused. "I'm not excited to talk about this, but I've had a lot of men because

I wanted to feel protected," she admits. "I wanted to know that the abuse would never happen again."

"I DON'T WANT TO BE IN CHARGE"

Sidney Hicks, who joins us in the family room, helped Mo'Nique see the value in therapy. Tall and handsome, unassuming and calm, he is the homeboy who knew and loved Mo'Nique back in the day. Mo'Nique told both Sidney and a close friend about the abuse when they were 18, but didn't share the full details with Sidney. He became her best buddy when they were in high school in Baltimore, and her third husband two years ago. "Sidney loved me when we were roommates [both were doing stand-up in Baltimore] and there was no money. We counted change out of his drawer and came up with \$15 to get a steak sub sandwich," she says. "He loved me then. He loved me when I was 14 and had on my white nurse shoes and jeans and thought I was sexy. He loved me then but said I was too mature for him."

By the time both were adults and had been around the block a few times with a few other people (she with two ex-husbands and one son; he never married, but with a son), Mo'Nique and Hicks were pushing up on 40. "I told Sid if we got to 40 and hadn't married other people, he'd better marry me," says Mo'Nique. Hicks told her she was crazy, but in May 2006, he married her anyway. These days Mo'Nique Hicks, the star who found the courage to confront her worst demons and emerge triumphant, is finding new contentment in her marriage to an old love. Hicks is clearly the yin to her yang, the cool brother who knows how to love and calm her fiery spirit. "This is the first time I've somewhat surrendered in a relationship," Mo'Nique admits, "and I'm still fighting it. I've always been the man in my relationships. I've always been the very dominant one. The beauty of it with Sid is that I don't want to be in charge. With Sid, it feels good to be vulnerable and it feels good to be a little girl and to be his wife."

Mo'Nique is aware that the fame and the fortune and the healthy family she has worked to create require vigilance and discipline to maintain. Her varied business ventures under Hicks Media, the production company she owns and Sidney heads, constitute a virtual empire that extends into TV and films, books and documentaries. Mo'Nique has proved over the years, in her roles as a performer, a producer and a major Hollywood player, that big is not just beautiful; it carries its own power when anchored by confidence, talent, business savvy—and a whole lot of nerve. □

Audrey Edwards is a contributing writer for the magazine.

MO'NIQUE'S FITNESS MAKEOVER

If you're seeing a little less of Mo'Nique these days, your eyes are not deceiving you. Yes, the woman who started the Fabulous and Thick Movement has shed 25 pounds—not for Hollywood but for herself. "My husband said to me one day, 'I want you for a lifetime.' Then it just clicked in—my weight had become a major concern. I wanted to be around for my family," says Mo'Nique, who began a new fitness and lifestyle routine in 2004. "I didn't want to become



GET THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

Mo'Nique wants you to know that if you or someone in your life has been sexually abused, there is help. Contact the following organizations:

RAPE, ABUSE & INCEST NATIONAL NETWORK
200 L St., N.W., Ste. 406
Washington DC 20036
(202) 544-3064
800-656-HOPE (800-656-4673)
rainn.org

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE
516 C St., N.E.
Washington DC 20002
800-239-9950
nca-online.org

THE NATIONAL CRIME VICTIM BAR
ASSOCIATION
2000 M St., N.W., Ste. 480
Washington DC 20036
800-FYI-CALL
202-467-8753
ncvc.org

JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN
1155 Connecticut Ave., N.W., 6th floor
Washington DC 20036
202-462-4688
jfcadvocacy.org

"PLEASE LISTEN IF YOUR BABY COMES TO YOU AND SAYS ANYTHING LIKE 'I WAS UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE WAY HE LOOKED AT ME OR THE WAY HE TOUCHED ME.' LISTEN TO THEM."

a burden because of my weight and the problems that could come as a result of it." She meets with a trainer five days a week, does cardio exercises, and lifts weights for extra toning and definition. "We should all want to live healthy lives because we don't want to be in a position where there are things we can't do and places we can't go," Mo'Nique says. She has even cut out some favorite dishes she mentioned in her best seller *Skinny Bitches*

Are Evil (Atria), like steak and fried chicken, now opting for healthier fare such as steamed fish and baked chicken. But there's one snack Mo'Nique can't resist: Doritos. "They just do it for me," she says. Even after gaining 20 pounds while pregnant, Mo'Nique stayed committed to her fitness and smart-eating plan. That discipline paid off, turning the once 257-pound actress into the new, improved 232-pound woman you see here.

—CANDICE FREDERICK