

5 Minutes with... Toks Olagundoye



Photo by Jeff Gottlieb

You play a space alien living in a New Jersey suburb on the ABC sitcom *The Neighbors*. How do you approach a role like that?

I try to have fun with it. The goal is to make these people as normal as possible, considering they are aliens. If we were to do it any other way, it wouldn't work, it would be too over-the-top. My character is a matriarch, a queen, who really wants to be this All-American mom. But she understands that she is very much an alien, too.

Do you have any actual experience with New Jersey?

Oh, yes. My sister is there in boarding school, at Peddie. I can see myself owning a home in New Jersey—the homes are beautiful. It's just a wonderful place.

Your character's name is Jackie Joyner-Kersey. What's the story there?

The aliens in *The Neighbors* named themselves after professional athletes because they wanted to be associated with the strongest and best physical specimens that the earth had to offer—thinking they would become a part of the elite. What they didn't realize, of course, is that it makes them stick out like sore thumbs.

Moving away from outer space...when you are preparing for a scene or performance, how important is it to create some personal space so you can relax and focus?

That's an interesting question because I am very protective about my space. I have always valued my space, and therefore having my space is something that is necessary to prepare for a role—whether it's off in a corner somewhere or in my trailer. My answer is that it depends on a lot of things. It depends on whether I am doing theater, film or television, and who's in the scene

with me. On *The Neighbors*, I know my role so well that I'm a little bit more comfortable. There's a difference if it's a guest-starring role, where I'm not as familiar with the people I am working with.

Toks Olagundoye is not exactly your typical Hollywood name. What is your family background?

My father is Nigerian. He went to Harvard, Yale and MIT. My mother is Norwegian, and is very successful in her own right. And while I come from what is considered a very well-off family, I know what it's like to not have running water, growing up in Nigeria. Americans live a very different life. I identify myself as a Nigerian; we are a very strong and proud people—as are Norwegians. I was raised by a very Norwegian mother and spent a ton of time in Norway every year until I was about 14. So I am totally split right down the middle. I am proud to say that I am both.

One more question about personal space. When you moved to Los Angeles, the story goes that you slept on a bean-bag chair, then an air mattress, and then a bargain Ikea mattress. Now that you've got a network sitcom, are you still sleeping on the Ikea mattress?

I sure am. However, I have a bed to go with it now.

Editors Note: Toks was interviewed by EDGE Assignments Editor **Zack Burgess**. To read more of his interviews, log onto zackburgess.com. For more info on *The Neighbors*, go to abc.go.com/shows/the-neighbors.