



“I GOT ADDICTED TO THE ATTENTION. I WANTED THE MALE GAZE”

ACTOR AND PRODUCER TAMMIN SURSOK GETS CANDID ABOUT SETBACKS, SELF-WORTH, SOCIAL MEDIA – AND THE EMOTIONS SHE HAS NAVIGATED SINCE HER FATHER’S DEMENTIA DIAGNOSIS

Interview Nicholas Fonseca

If Tammin Sursok ever decides to add another job to a busy career that includes acting, producing and a whole lot of content creation, she might do well to consider life coaching. By the end of nearly an hour’s conversation with *Stellar* – one that touches on body

image, sexual harassment, raising two daughters, self-doubt, the importance of making (and shedding) friends, social media candour and a health diagnosis that has sucker-punched her family – she has imparted as many sharp kernels of advice as wise answers to numerous questions.

And it is one kernel in particular she reflects upon at the end of the chat that hits hardest, a statement that immediately empowers and chills with its incisiveness. At 43, and after decades in an industry that often values surface qualities above all else, Sursok admits she no longer defines herself by how

others see her. “I have always equated success with my career,” she tells *Stellar*. “But my idea of happiness has probably changed. Success can be like, ‘I’m successful. I have a loving family.’ But I still believe the true meaning of success equates to your why. And I don’t think – and this might be controversial – that people’s why is ever in other people.”

This is where Sursok gets deep. “There’s something that you’re meant to leave behind,” she says. “Yes, we leave behind family and friends and kids, but what is your thing? I believe everyone has it, and I think the people that probably feel the most sad are the ones that don’t know what it is yet, or haven’t figured it out, or are too afraid. Because it’s scary to go, ‘Oh, I was meant to be a writer, but I have to actually do the work...’

“There’s a great quote that I love, and I use it all the time. I say to everyone I know: No-one is coming to save you. They’re not. They might save you for a day, a week, a month. But no-one is coming to save you. There is no freaking rowboat. It’s you, buddy. People can save you for a bit. They can give you money. They can give you an opportunity. But at the end of the day, you’re born alone, you die alone, and you just have to do it.”

Sursok was living that very message when she left a successful four-year stint on *Home And Away* in 2004, and tried her luck in the UK – where she attempted a short-lived music career – before decamping to Los Angeles. The origin story is classic Hollywood stuff: she arrived on a one-way ticket with, as she often says, “two suitcases and a dream”.

A job proved harder to come by. For years, she juggled constant auditions and endless rejections before a last-minute reprieve arrived in the form of a role in the 2006 teen fantasy film *Aquamarine*. Then came substantive jobs on TV series like *The*

Young And The Restless, *Hannah Montana* and *Pretty Little Liars*.

But she has also been pragmatic about the swings and misses of her chosen profession, branching out with her production company, Charlie Baby, which she founded with her husband, Sean McEwen. She has also cultivated a healthy Instagram following of 1.3 million strong by posting all manner of content, much of it raw and unfiltered. In April, Sursok shared a teary video in which she got word that a role she was all but guaranteed had gone to another actor. “I was heartbroken in that moment,” Sursok explains. “And I thought, you know what? I’m gonna record this for myself. Because I do like to document when things are hard. Because [then] I can look back on it if, you know, I do get a big job, and think, ‘It’s possible. It can always happen.’”

Sursok adds that part of her strategy in posting that video (which elicited comments of support from A-listers like

Jennifer Garner and Sarah Paulson) is that by being open about the messy side of her life, “I want people to feel less alone in theirs.” After the birth of her first daughter, Phoenix, in 2013, Sursok found herself in the grip of postpartum depression and recalls “wishing that people had shared their journey. I felt really awful, and I felt that no-one really shared how bad it was. So from then on, I was like, ‘I’m gonna share.’”

This past winter, Sursok shared the far more personal news that her father, Daryl, had been diagnosed with dementia. Back home during her chat with *Stellar*, Sursok – who splits her time between Nashville and Sydney – has been able to spend time at his side.

She is frank when assessing his condition. “It’s not something that is fixable, or that is going to heal itself,” she says. “So I’ve been through all the stages of grief. Sometimes it feels like numbness. But I do feel like it’s acceptance because there is nothing I can do. All I can do is create some enjoyable moments for him.”

Asked how she handles the tension of living overseas while her mother looks after her father, Sursok replies, “I almost feel like it would be harder for me to be here full time, and that’s just me being super honest and vulnerable. I sometimes grapple with the guilt. I don’t feel guilty going to work and leaving my kids with my husband. He’s the freaking dad; he’s fine. But I do feel guilty leaving my mum with my dad. I worry about her. Because with dementia, at some point it’s worse for the caregiver than it is for the actual person who’s got it.”

Sursok’s blunt-force honesty is refreshing; she doesn’t hold back when she explains how she mothers Phoenix, who will turn 13 on Thursday, and Lennon, seven. Having previously disclosed her own disordered eating and anxiety about

This week...

A GRITTY GRAZIER TAKES ON THE WORLD IN A PAGE-TURNER

Fans of *The Dressmaker*, *The Paris Seamstress* and *The Woolgrower’s Companion* will be charmed by *The Paris Prize*, a sweeping story of love, legacy and obsession. Australian author Tania Blanchard’s latest novel follows grazier Maddy, who battles devastating drought, bushfires, dust storms – and old attitudes. When the prestigious Paris Wool Prize comes knocking, she must compete on the global stage. *The Paris Prize* (\$34.99, HarperCollins) is out now.



DOUBLE THE MUM TROUBLE IN A NEW HORROR MOVIE

Based on the 2024 horror novel *Incidents Around The House* by Josh Malerman (who also wrote *Bird Box*, which inspired the post-apocalyptic thriller film by the same name), *Other Mommy* stars Jessica Chastain as a mother trying to protect her daughter from a supernatural doppelganger. Produced by Australian filmmaker James Wan (*Saw*, *The Conjuring*, *Insidious*), the film raised eyebrows after the trailer produced numerous headlines due to its terrifying scenes. In cinemas from Thursday.

Jessica Chastain stars in *Other Mommy*.