

Summer Glau

February 24, 2008 by Tasha Robinson

*Summer Glau started acting professionally when she was 21, but for her, that was practically a late-life career change: From early childhood, she'd planned to be a ballerina, and she was home-schooled from third to 12th grade to accommodate her intensive training schedule. She transitioned into acting with a guest role—as a ballerina, naturally—on Joss Whedon's *Angel*, which led to a co-starring role as River Tam in his next series, *Firefly*, and the big-screen spin-off, *Serenity*. She's also had recurring roles on *The 4400* and *The Unit*, in addition to one-off parts on *CSI* and *Cold Case*. Currently, Glau is appearing as Cameron, the almost-human, frequently fighting "good" Terminator on Fox's *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. (The two-hour season finale airs March 3.) Glau recently spoke with *The A.V. Club* about how a camel saddle took her from dancing to acting, and why she worries people might think she's a hack.*

The A.V. Club: What was the audition for the Terminator series like?

Summer Glau: Well, I was very nervous. I thought I was going to be in a room of six-foot blondes. I went in and I realized that Josh Friedman had written the pilot, and I'm a huge fan of his work. I think he is a creative genius, and if anyone could do this series, it was him. So I was very, very excited to have the opportunity to work with him, and he and I hit it off from the beginning. I ended up going in and testing for the role, and going to the network, and it was a good fit, once I understood the character.

The A.V. Club: Was there a fight audition as well?

Summer Glau: Josh knew that I had done martial arts in *Serenity*, and he had seen my fighting, so he knew I could do it. I remember sitting in the lobby, after my studio test, and I could hear them watching my fight scenes in the room, so I knew that that was a factor they wanted to make sure I had—physical ability. I grew up being a ballet dancer, so I'm very comfortable doing physical roles, and that's one of the main reasons why I wanted to play Cameron.

The A.V. Club: The fighting styles on Terminator and Serenity are obviously very different—flat-out brawls vs. controlled martial arts. And then there's your ballet experience. Do the different kinds of training ever get in each other's way? Did you have to unlearn things?

Summer Glau: It's funny you should ask me, because I asked to have a meeting with Joel Kramer—our stunt coordinator for *Sarah Connor Chronicles*—because I wanted to know what sort of training I needed to play Cameron. I remembered the extremely strenuous process of learning all the martial arts for *Serenity*; I did the fight scenes myself from start to finish, no cutaways, and I have to say, it's one of the hardest things I'd done in my life. So I was bracing myself for that with *Sarah Connor*, but when I met with Joel, I said, "Well, how does the Terminator fight?" He said, "Basically, you just pick things up and throw them, you run through walls, and you shoot lots of fun guns. I'm going to have you jump off of cars and things like that." I said, "Okay, that sounds great." [Laughs.] He took me to the shooting range and taught me how to shoot a lot of different guns. For the most part, it's about learning how to crash through things safely, and protecting each other when you're doing hand-to-hand fights, but there's no finesse. A Terminator doesn't need to do that, because they're always the strongest person in the room.

The A.V. Club: Do they ever get on your case about being too fancy, or having too much of a martial-arts stance?

Summer Glau: No. The one thing that Joel says is for me to not make an expression. I always want to scowl when I fight, and I don't have to do that any more. I wasn't supposed to do that in *Serenity*, either; Joss wanted me to look very serene, but when I get riled up to do a fight scene, I always get a look on my face.

The A.V. Club: Do you end up going through a lot of takes for that? It's got to be difficult if a shot involves smashing someone through a wall, and you have the wrong facial expression.

Summer Glau: We only get to do it once. I have to be very, very focused when we do our fight scenes. You don't get to do a lot of different takes, because so many things are getting broken. It's funny, if you walk on our set, there's all these "DO NOT TOUCH" signs, because all our sets are breakaways. But it's really fun.

The A.V. Club: Is it true you went into acting because you hurt yourself and had to take a break from your dance career?

Summer Glau: Yes, that's true.

The A.V. Club: Had you ever considered acting before that?

Summer Glau: When I was little, I had a feeling that I was going to end up being an actress. I spent a lot of time alone, I was a very shy girl, and I would pretend I was telling someone about this new role that I got. I would just talk about it: "I'm doing this movie..." or "I'm playing this girl..." I never took any acting classes and I never went to school for it, because I was dancing all the time. But then I broke one of my toes, and I had really bad tendonitis in my heels already, so I lost all mobility on one of my feet. I danced on it broken for four months. The way I broke it was, I had started taking this little acting class, and I was reading a play, and the phone rang, and I scooped all the pages off the floor, and I ran and jumped over this camel saddle we had in our living room, and I ran right into the fireplace.

The A.V. Club: Did you say a "camel saddle"?

Summer Glau: Yes. [Laughs.]

The A.V. Club: Why did you have a camel saddle in your living room?

Summer Glau: My grandpa was a world traveler. He was a pilot in the Air Force, and he picked up these camel saddles, and we had them in our living room. [Laughs.] But I jumped over one, and I had this script in my hand, and I couldn't see what I was running into, and that's how I smashed my foot. So it was actually the play that got me in trouble in the first place. It was meant to be.

The A.V. Club: How did you prepare yourself to switch from dancing to acting?

Summer Glau: It was one of the most painful things I've ever done, because when you're raised as a ballet dancer, you think that's the only thing people notice about you. That's all I ever did. And it was terrifying, I thought "People won't even recognize me, people won't know how to describe me any more, people won't know how to say, 'Summer Glau, that girl who dances...'" Because that's who I always was. No one understood why I did it at the time. I was always the kid on scholarship, I was a soloist with my company, I'd been working with the symphony since I was 14. It was probably the craziest thing I'd ever done. I just had a feeling that it was going to work out for me. And the thing about being a ballet dancer is, there comes a point when you have to decide "How much am I willing to sacrifice to keep dancing?" And I knew that it was going to be extremely difficult if I wanted to move into a big company. It was going to be extremely difficult to have the career I dreamt about as a little girl. It's so competitive; it's a lifestyle—not just a job. You have to completely give yourself over to it.

When I was 19, it was a turning point for me—I was in so much pain every day, and I came into L.A. for the summer, and I had a friend who was dancing at the theater, and I thought, "Well, I can still dance—I just can't put on my shoes, I can't wear my pointe shoes all day long. So I came out here thinking it would be a getaway for the summer, and I ended up auditioning for jobs and booking them right away. I still danced. I danced tango for a year until I got some acting work. And then that was it. It was the right fit for me. I moved my things out here and went for it.

The A.V. Club: Do you keep up on ballet at all?

Summer Glau: I still dance. I still dance, probably three times a week, unless I'm working on a crazy job, and then I just don't have any free time at all. Right now, I definitely dance. I don't do ballet, because for me, it's kind of hard to look at myself dancing when I don't do it all day long, every day. There's this certain caliber of dancing I was striving for when I was younger, and it's very hard for me to go back and just do it for fun. But I take all other kinds of classes: I take jazz classes, modern classes, and I love doing that instead of going to the gym. The gym is not very much fun.

The A.V. Club: You worked in commercials, but your one-shot on Angel was your first actual TV role, wasn't it?

Summer Glau: It was. It's so funny, too. I was out of town, I missed the dance audition; Joss had actually held the dance audition first, before the acting audition. He wanted a dancer, but I missed it. I'm a good ballet dancer, and I would have done well in the audition, but I missed it! And then I went in and read for him, and it was the biggest audition I ever had—and I thought he didn't like me. I thought he was making fun of me, and when I left the room, I said to myself, "Well, that's someone I'll never see again." And then he ended up casting me without seeing me dance, and the choreographer panicked. I had to dance Giselle, and that's a role I didn't even get to dance in real life. It's one of the most elaborate in classical ballet, and he just told me, "Well, I just hope you don't have wooden legs." Sure enough, it all worked out. I did it, and the choreographer was relieved that I was a true ballet dancer. That was my first experience. Joss gave me my first guest-star on a TV show, he gave me my first series regular on a TV show, and he gave me my first lead in a film.

The A.V. Club: What was the transition like when he cast you as River Tam? Did you have to audition and win him over again, or was it easier than that?

Summer Glau: It wasn't originally his idea to cast me in the role, but I ended up going in for a work-study session with him where I read for him and his casting director, before I went in to meet with the producers. I was terrified. But when I read those lines for River, I knew how I wanted to read it, I know how I wanted to do it. I went in, shaking like a leaf, and did it. I remember Amy Britt, his casting director, looked at me and said, "Well that's how you do that." And Joss said, "Yeah. That's how you should do it." That was my first test ever with the studio. I'd never done anything like that before. It took them a long time to give me the role. I had to wait for a few weeks. They weren't concerned with my role so much as they were with the other characters, and they wanted to cast those other characters before me. So I waited and waited. It was agony. Finally, I was sitting on the floor of my little apartment, sitting there in the quiet, and my phone rang. It was Joss telling me that I was the girl. That's what he said. That was probably the biggest turning point in my life so far. To be making money for the first time in my life. To go from being a dancer to actually being on a TV show, where I was going to be on every week. It was just one of the biggest moments ever.

The A.V. Club: How much did you actually know about River when the show started?

Summer Glau: Very little. We didn't even get a script. We got a treatment that told us the basic storyline and the basic characters. I had one scene—I kept the scene, I still have it in my file, the scene I auditioned with—and that's all I ever knew. It took a long time for us to get a script. But it's just one of those cases where I felt connected to River Tam, and I knew how I wanted to play the role.

The A.V. Club: How does that compare with how much you knew about Cameron going into Terminator, or how much you knew about Crystal going into The Unit?

Summer Glau: Well Crystal was a big surprise, because they threw me for a loop with her. I had an idea who I thought she was, and when they gave me the concept to play the role, she was a very different character. Then, over time, they kept taking me on

these twists and turns—I loved playing that role. Loved being Crystal. It was so much fun to be bad, even though my boyfriend in real life was my boyfriend on the show. It was so hard to treat him so badly on TV.

But as far as playing Cameron, I was stumped on that one. I went in and told Josh, "I don't know, I have played such vulnerable and emotional characters up until now. That's what I'm comfortable with. I don't know how I'm going to play a robot and make people care about her, and for me as an actress to connect to her." So it was really a team effort. Josh had such great concepts for who he wanted Cameron to be. And then after he had the basic story and wrote the pilot episode, the writers as a team helped me decide who she is, and the fine line between the mystery of how much she really feels, and how much she is just a Terminator. And we're still shaping it, because we're in the very beginning; she's definitely changing every day. She's like a child, in that she absorbs everything around her, and she can really take on the personalities she observes.

The A.V. Club: All those roles, and your role in *The 4400* as well, are people who start off in one place go through a bunch of twists, and become someone else. How do you go about making a character consistent through that?

Summer Glau: Well, I put a lot of faith in the people around me. I'm definitely one of those actresses who comes to a set knowing how I want to do a scene, and I definitely love input from my directors and my writers. I know that there's some actors who like to be left alone, they like to be very independent, but I actually really enjoy the teamwork. I've been very lucky in my career, that I've been given these opportunities to do huge story arcs with my characters. Like in *4400*, where I started off in one place and ended up in a completely different place. It's great as an actress when you get those opportunities. But basically, it's coming and being mature about the individual right in front of you, and having an open heart, and being able to listen to the people right around you.

The A.V. Club: When you started on *The 4400*, your character was a lot like River, spacey and disconnected and tuned into another reality. Now you're playing this detached, mostly emotionless killer-cyborg girl. Do you worry about getting typecast in the weird-girl role?

Summer Glau: Yes, but what I worry about more is people figuring out I'm not a very good actress, and that I cannot make my characters different. So when Tess first came into play [on *The 4400*], I called Joss and said, "Please don't watch this, because you might think that I'm a hack—I cannot make her different from River." He called me after my first episode as Tess, and told me that he approved of the good job of making them different. And with Cameron, people ask me, "Do you think there are similarities between River and Cameron?" And I have to say, "Well I guess I'm good at playing these isolated characters." It's so much true to life, because I grew up not going to school, I didn't have fun at my own age because I was dancing, since I was trying to be a professional as a young girl. I did have a hard time relating to kids my age. I remember if I ever had to be in with school kids, I would get very nervous. I didn't know the right way to communicate with them. I think I just have a connection with girls like River and Cameron and Tess.

The A.V. Club: Was that kind of isolation and professionalism as a child your choice? Did you have a stage-mom type pushing you to those kinds of extremes?

Summer Glau: To me, there was no other option. I wanted it with all my heart, and I honestly thought my identity was being a dancer. It was very hard for me to look at myself outside of that. And when I decided to quit, it was completely up to me. I will say, when my parents drove me out to L.A., I begged them to take me back home. I've always had really bad anxiety, and it wasn't until I stayed here that I grew out of that. But my parents had to say, "Honey, you can do this. We believe in you." They told me to stay and relax, and it all worked out. They have always been supportive of me, no matter

what I wanted to do. I remember my mom, she used to work for my ballet company. She worked in the wardrobe department, she used to go with me to my ballet camps, because I was so shy and I had a hard time going alone. She used to go and stay with me so that I could train with other teachers. They're a huge part of why I am where I am.

The A.V. Club: If you worry about people thinking you're a hack because your characters are too similar, what would you like to do to show them your range? What's your dream role?

Summer Glau: When I envisioned myself as an actress as a little girl, I wanted to do period films. My favorite actress is Juliette Binoche. I used to watch her movies over and over and over again. I always wanted to be in very romantic roles. That's something that I still haven't gotten around to. It is a concern now that I've been playing so many roles like Cameron and River. I do want to do something completely different. I want to do a Western, being a Texan, and growing up around that. Something really dear to my heart. I have to say my favorite movie of the year is 3:10 To Yuma. Have you seen it? [Sighs.] Love that movie. So those are my two goals, and when I get around to them, that's great. I couldn't have asked for more opportunities in my career so far, so I'm totally happy playing Cameron. But I keep myself open to the possibility of seeing those goals realized too.

Taken from AV Club's website:

<http://www.avclub.com/articles/summer-glau,14203/>