

Focus

Former 'Talk Soup' host hopes to be an agent of social change

(AP)—Aisha Tyler looks at a reporter's hand extended in greeting and declines to shake. Is the new addition to "Friends" unfriendly? No, just considerate.

"I have a cold," she says apologetically, clutching a tissue. It takes more than a minor bug to keep Tyler down, however. The actress and comedian is energetic, smart and, snuffles or not, a real stunner.

Tyler, who begins a four-week run on "Friends" starting Thursday, April 24 (8 p.m. EST), also happens to be among the very few nonwhite love interests—or faces, for that matter—to grace the popular NBC comedy.

Ross (David Schwimmer) and Joey (Matt LeBlanc) compete for the attentions of Tyler's character, a sexy paleontologist who shares Ross' passion for dinosaurs.

She's not the first nonwhite girlfriend on "Friends," Tyler points out—Asian-American actress Lauren Tom and Gabrielle Union, who's black, have appeared. But Tyler has a sustained role in a show that's been criticized for whitewashing multiethnic Manhattan.

"The role wasn't written particularly for an African-American. I think they were just trying to cast the right actress," Tyler said.

She nearly didn't survive hearing the good news from her manager, delivered by cell phone while Tyler was driving in Los Angeles



Actress-comic Aisha Tyler Lands a Spot on 'Friends'

Aisha Tyler will have a four-week run as a sexy paleontologist on 'Friends.' The former 'Talk Soup' host is not the first non-white character on the hit NBC comedy, but she happens to be one of the first ethnic love interests of lead characters Ross and Joey.

ended last year but helped make her a media darling: Esquire magazine deemed her one of the "Women We Love" and Maxim listed her among its "Hot 100." It also won her the devotion of fans, including high school and college boys who write

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—Actress-comic Aisha Tyler on changing the perception of black women through her media image

she said. "It was the biggest thing in the whole world."

Bigger even than her job as the host of E! Entertainment's "Talk Soup." In 2001, she became its first female host.

The 11-year-old comedy show

such sweet nothings as "You're the funniest chick I've ever seen" and offer to buy her a beer.

When Tyler tried out for "Talk Soup," she thought the show would never hire a black woman. "I was just going to go in and have a fun

time."

Given a shot as guest host, she drew such an overwhelming response from viewers that she was hired full time. Witty AND sexy—what's not to like? Others appreciated what she stood for as well.

"What's wonderful is there are people who would write in saying, 'It's so great to see a smart, offbeat black woman on TV,'" Tyler said. "But I don't think I set out to have a standard-bearer career. I just set out to be funny and communicate with people."

Being an agent of social change is "a heavy burden," she said, jokingly. But she knows that pop culture images carry weight.

"Typically, black women are not seen as attractive in white culture, so maybe it's a coup for a black woman who isn't light to appeal to black and white men," she told Heart & Soul magazine last year. "Maybe it's a coup for us that we start to be seen as attractive—not as pretty for black girls, but just beautiful, period."

Black-white gap narrows for TV viewers

Nine of 20 top shows are equally watched by both African Americans and Caucasians

(AP)—As networks add diversity to their prime-time casts, blacks and whites share more favorite series than ever, an annual study of viewing habits reports.

Nine of the top 20 series among black households also are favorites among whites, the most overlap in at least 10 years, says the latest study of black viewing trends from ad-buying firm Initiative Media. Most are dramas such as ER, Law & Order, CSI and Judging Amy, but Monday Night Football and 60 Minutes also made both lists.

"In the past there has always been a polarization; the top 20 lists



Cedric the Entertainer is the "Lunch Lady" in Fox's Cedric the Entertainer Presents, the most popular show in black households.

were very different," Initiative's Stacey Lynn Koerner said. "Now what we're seeing is there are more shows these ethnic groups have in common. One of the reasons is the shows themselves are depicting multiethnic casts and multiethnic situations."

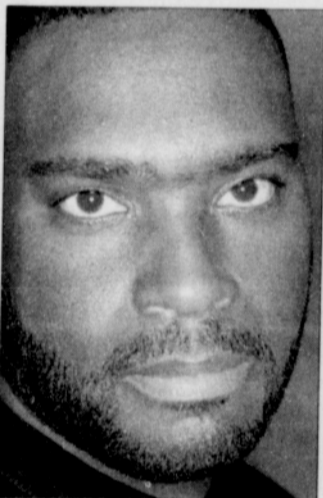
Though fewer shows feature predominantly black casts—NBC and WB have none—51 of last fall's series included ethnically di-

verse casts, up from just 13 in 1995, the study says.

The study also showed that blacks continue to watch more TV than any other demographic group, an average of 76.8 hours a week—the most viewing in eight years—compared with 53.1 hours a week for whites. Black homes watch far more daytime, late-night, Saturday morning and cable programming.

Fox's Cedric the Entertainer Presents was last fall's most popular series in black homes, followed by UPN's quartet of Monday sitcoms, led by One on One and Girlfriends.

Although the overall audience for those sitcoms was nearly 80% black, other black-led series showed popularity among a more diverse audience. Cedric's audience was 52% black, compared with 39% for Bernie Mac and just 24% for ABC's Damon Wayans sitcom, My Wife and Kids.



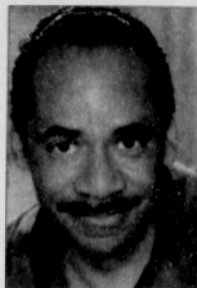
Fisher Turns to Fun

Screenwriter Antwone Fisher (above), whose troubled childhood and youth were chronicled in the drama Antwone Fisher, will draw from his childhood for a comedy film. The movie project will be set in the world of foster care and revolves around the relationship between a foster child and an unqualified caregiver.

Reid Addresses Media Image

(AP)—Black Americans should take control of their image in the media, actor Tim Reid says.

Reid, 58, best known for his TV roles on "WKRP in Cincinnati," "Simon & Simon" and "Frank's Place," has



Tim Reid

"I'm not sure black folks fully understand the power that media has in our life," Reid said Wednesday at Morgan State University. "We are becoming who they portray us as being. We've allowed ourselves to become a collection of negative statistics. Simon says dress like a gangster, and we do." Reid gave the keynote address at the historically black university's first Communication Day.

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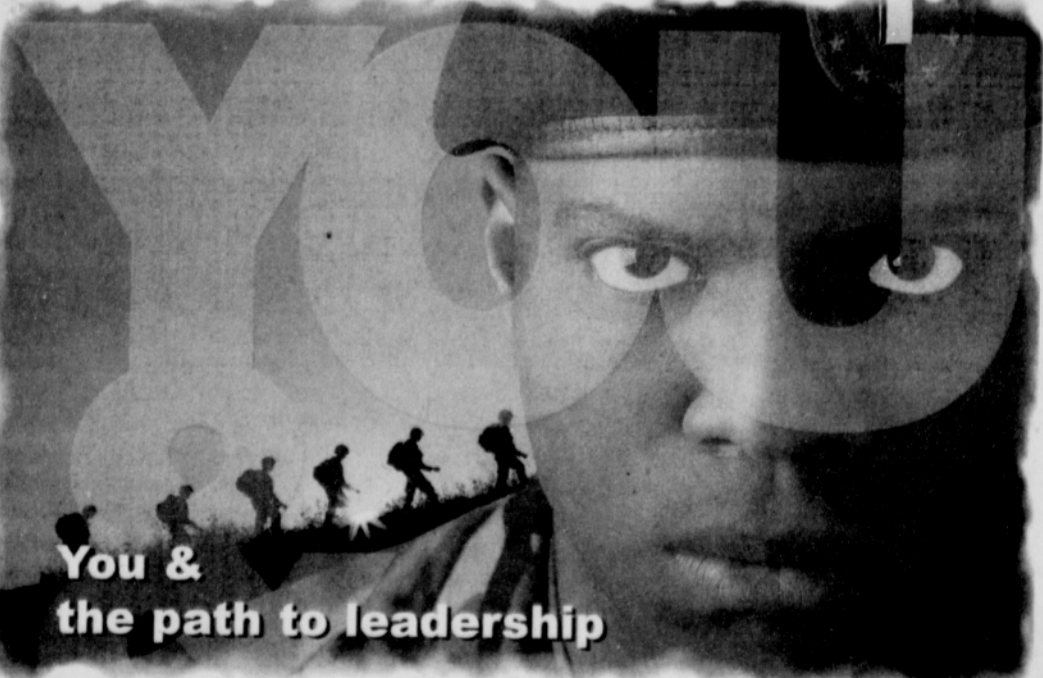
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