

When baby-faced Fox executives first embarked on their quest for the young-urban-market dollar, they offered performers like Keenen Ivory Wayans and Charles Dutton titles that promised an unusually high degree of creative control for African Americans. Of course, the deals weren't exactly what they were cracked up to be. When *In Living Color* hit big, the upstart network got greedy and attempted to make syndication dollars on Thursdays while continuing with first-run episodes on Sundays. Naturally, the Wayans family walked. And when *Roc* failed to earn big ratings, Fox began exercising its veto power over the show's content. But the fact remains that for a moment the fourth network almost seemed like a black network.

Those days are gone. Having made a name for itself by "narrow-casting" for the young, urban (read: African American and Latino) market, Fox has apparently decided, like many a Denny's franchise owner before them, that too many black faces spoil the broth. On May 24—let's call it White Tuesday—Fox canceled *In Living Color*, *Roc*, *Sinbad*, and *South Central*. In fact, the only black-produced shows to survive the purge were *Martin* and *Living Single*, which will run on Thursday nights, followed by Dick Wolf and Andre Harrell's new one-hour action drama, *Uptown Undercover*. The latter, together with another action drama, *Mantis*, were the only new black pilots picked up by Fox for the fall season. (Fox would not comment for this story.)

Some of the shows canceled, like *Roc*, went out with a fight. In a last ditch effort to salvage the working-class dramedy, 29 black members of Congress signed a letter of protest to Rupert Murdoch, while Congressman Ed Towns even issued a statement that members of the Congressional Black Caucus will not stand for the "paternalistic" cancellation of positive black shows. Similarly, *South Central* producers Ralph Farquhar and Michael Weithorn traveled with series star Tina Lifford to the nation's capital June 8 to address the CBC, the National Council of Negro Women, and the NAACP leadership regarding the larger issue of African Americans in television.

Sinbad was dumped less ceremoniously. In fact, the ill-fated show had been plagued with conflicts from its very inception. The show's star says that he was constantly frustrated by decisions Fox producers and execs made with-

out his knowledge or approval—such as efforts to spice up his character's fatherly image by making him more of a ladies man, and the mixing of Gloria, a Latina character whose presence *Sinbad* had hoped would provide "involvement between Spanish and black people—something we never see." (Fox producers called her "dead weight," says *Sinbad*.) Adding insult to injury, *Sinbad* first learned of his show's cancellation from *USA Today*.

Roc's executive producer and star, Charles Dutton, didn't receive the courtesy of a phone call either. But that slight was only the latest in a series that his show suffered during its three-year run. Two years ago, Kyle Bowser, who oversaw production of *Roc*, arranged for Jesse Jackson to appear on the sitcom. Soon after, he received a late-night phone call from a higher-up who had only one question: Was Bowser a "militant"? Jackson's guest appearance was canceled.

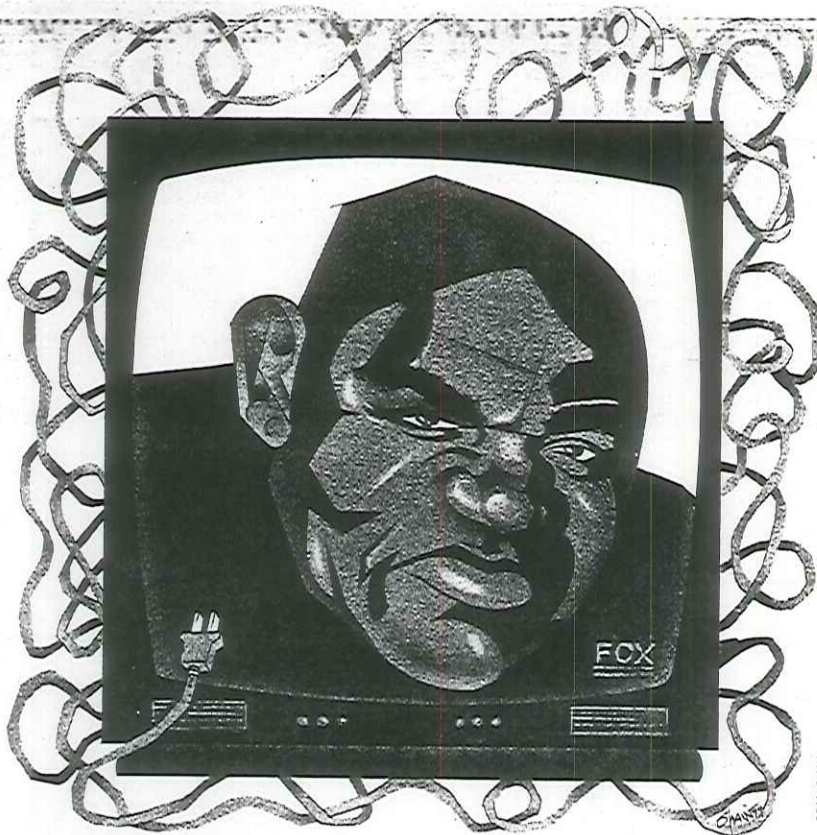
A day before its fall lineup was announced, Fox revealed its headline-making \$500 million deal with New World Communications Group to purchase a dozen new affiliate stations—a move that helps establish Fox as the "fourth network" it has so long claimed to be.

Behind closed doors, CBS, which lost the most affiliates to

Fox, must surely be simmering with *rabia*. After all, the renowned "Tiffany Network" (i.e., the network most resistant to non-white programming) had lost yet another foothold to the guys who gambled on POC and won. In the faux pas of the week, CBS president Howard Stringer alluded to Fox's maneuvering with a defense that raised hairs on the back of the NAACP's neck. Distinguishing its own strategy from that of Fox whippersnappers, Stringer proclaimed that CBS would certainly not be found "chasing downscale adult urban audiences." Unfortunately, neither will Fox—now that it's grabbed the

nation's viewers (and eight CBS affiliates), it seems prepared to dump its "downscale urban audience" for the upscale sort advertisers like.

Where will black-oriented programming go from here? *House Party* director Reggie Hudlin, who unsuccessfully tried to make the shift from films to TV, speculates that since many of the original Fox crew have signed on at Warner Brothers (which is trying to establish a fifth network), perhaps that is where black TV auteurs should be pitching their wares. That is to say, it may be good business for the fifth, sixth, and seventh networks to take an-



STAY SHAW

Blackout

Charles Dutton Talks About
Fox's Great Black Purge of '94

other ride on the backs of the "downscale" demographic, at least until they're large enough to vie for "respectability" from real America: white suburban football fans with man-size appetites... and wallets.

In the wake of all this, Charles Dutton agreed to speak to the *Voice* to discuss his experiences with Fox and his ideas about black television in general.

DUTTON: First of all, let me just clear up one thing. My beef isn't with Fox in particular. My argument is with the industry as a whole. As far as I'm concerned, Fox just pretended to be—for five years—this cutting-edge television. But that's all it was: a disguise. There is nothing wrong with television as a whole as we know it in America except for one glaring exception, and that is: there's a serious Jim Crow law in Hollywood. And that Jim Crow law, in my opinion, is, after 9 p.m. no Blacks, dogs, or Latinos on the air. So it's not Fox, per se. It's the television industry, period. On one hand I have to praise Fox for allowing me to do the kind of television I wanted to do for those three seasons. On the other hand, I have to criticize them for an uphill battle in basically trying to do the kind of show I did. It is my opinion that if I was doing what Martin Lawrence was doing, if I was doing what some of those buffoon male characters on *Living Single* were doing, if our show was made of fluff—lightweight material such as *Family Matters* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, I would have been on the air for five more seasons.

ZOOK: Were there major points in [your agreement with Fox] that didn't pan out the way you wanted them to?

DUTTON: Once you get a network involved, your original concept is splintered into a thousand pieces. The problem is, if you gave me eight writers—four black and four white—I wouldn't hire the white writers to do an African American comedy. I'd hire them to do an African American drama, however.

ZOOK: Why is that?

DUTTON: Because a drama is easier to write... If you do something with murder and tragedy, it could be white as well as black. Take O. J. Simpson's case, for example. I'm sure there'll be 10,000 movies of the week on that.

ZOOK: So what happens when white writers try to do African American comedy?

DUTTON: Basically white writers in Hollywood have a drive-by mentality with the African American community. And first and foremost, they have been conditioned in television to write what I call "the Norman Lear mentality of black comedy," which to me

A PILOT IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

Echoing the general disappointment among African American producers and talent, *Sinbad* director Chuck Vinson calls the Fox purge of black shows "a major mistake," while Warrington Hudlin, founder of the Black Filmmaker Foundation (BFF), maintains that "American television is confused about what America is." Equally disconcerting is that Fox not only canceled old shows, but also passed on some of the more innovative pilots to come along in some time. On June 4, the First Annual Fes-

tival of Television Network Pilots, sponsored by Hudlin's BFF, screened 10 black-produced pilots for a members-only audience in L.A.

While the new crop of rejected pilots certainly had its share of bombs, two of the one-hour dramas screened met with overwhelming approval from BFF members. *The Last Days of Russell* (written and directed by Reginald Hudlin) was roundly praised for its subtle humor and sophistication. Referred to as a "black *Wonder Years*," the show

depicts a day in the life of a 13-year-old boy convinced that he's going to die before his 14th birthday (as did his namesake, "Uncle Russell"). Notwithstanding such a morbid premise, and a backdrop of gang violence and urban decay, Russell's world is actually full of laughter, daydreams, and celebration. Hudlin's attempt to find the humor in pathos works like nothing you've ever seen (or will see) on TV.

Thomas Carter's *Under One*
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