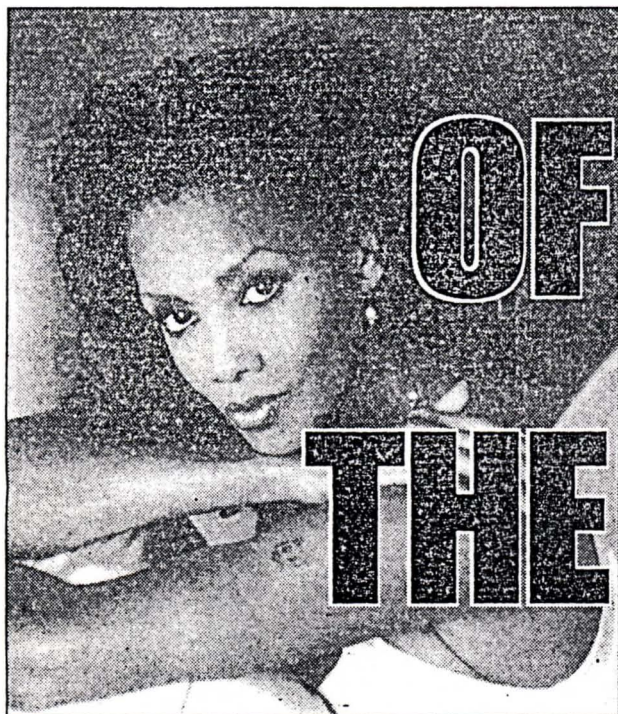


TV Sunday

ANGEL



'CITY'

Just as civil-rights groups were threatening to boycott the networks over the lack of black faces in primetime, a major new hospital drama — "City of Angels" — is set to premiere next month. It just happens to have a predominantly black cast. "Independence Day" star Vivica Fox, who has a lead role in it, is thrilled to be surrounded, for once, by other black actors. But it's not a race thing.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

What better timing for CBS. The fall season was marred by on-target complaints from the NAACP and others that network television is lily-white. Despite a few sidekicks of color tossed onto existing series, nothing much has changed.

And the calls for boycotts have grown more insistent.

Flying to the rescue is "City of Angels," Steven Bochco's hour-long hospital drama set in LA and peopled predominantly by African Americans. It arrives just as dramas are flourishing again in primetime. (The show premieres Sunday, Jan. 16, at 8 p.m., then moves to a permanent time slot, Wednesdays at 8.)

But if the show's star, Vivica A. Fox, has her way, people will soon forget all about the politics surrounding a series that was in the works long before the current controversy.

"I'm trying to turn that whole minority issue into a positive thing instead of a negative," says the beautiful 35-year-old star.

"A show's got to be good to last, whether it's black or white. I really don't want that to be the emphasis, because I don't want to turn off any of the audience."

"It's not just a black show — we've got crossover appeal. Myself [and costars] Blair Underwood and Michael Warren definitely have crossover appeal. And we have other nationalities. I'm really hoping the whole emphasis doesn't become 'It's the black show, the black thing. It's black!'"

Fox plays Lillian Price, the medical director of Angels of Mercy. She's called in to turn the flagging hospital around and get it accredited.

A driven career woman — "She has no romantic life," says Fox — Price is using Angels of Mercy as a stepping stone to the next stage of her career. She also reunites with an old flame.

"Lillian used to be engaged to Ben Turner (Underwood)," explains Fox, "but he dumped her three days before the wedding. He left her at the altar."

"Their lives have reconvened at this hospital, and now she's his boss — which makes for excellent storylines as far as I'm concerned."

Fox — who made her name with strong performances in films like "Soul Food," "Independence Day" and "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" — talks with savvy about the importance of a good time slot.

"I won't lie to you — at first it made me a little nervous to be on Wednesdays at 8 because most of the shows that come on at 8 are sitcoms. I thought it would be on at 9 or 10."

"The one thing that's good is it premieres during the winter when most people are at home because of the weather," she says.

However the early timeslot plays out, a Steven Bochco drama is about as sure a bet on TV as it gets. Or is it?

"Steven Bochco is the crème de



I've been on great shows that have been cancelled," says Vivica Fox. "And I've been on shows that — well, they deserved to be cancelled." One series that died quickly was "Getting Personal" (lower left). Instead she made her rep in movies like "Independence Day" (left) and "Soul Food" (above).

TV Sunday



In "City of Angels," Fox plays a driven medical administrator — who has no love life since her ex, Blair Underwood (with Fox, right), dumped her three days before the wedding. Now she's back — as his boss "which makes for excellent storylines," says Fox. "I'm really hoping the whole emphasis doesn't become 'It's the black show, the black thing. It's black!'"

la crème," insists Fox.

But in fact Bochco hasn't had a strong hit since "NYPD Blue" in 1993. ("Murder One" was a critical success but lasted only two years. Other shows like "Public Morals" and "Brooklyn South" disappeared even faster.)

Besides, Fox has been on sure things before — most notably the sitcom "Arsenio," which was picked as a winner before even one episode had been taped.

"They were totally hyped on the show, but they gave it three weeks," says Fox. "I don't know what they were expecting in three weeks."

"Seinfeld" took four years before it hit its stride.

Hopefully, they'll give 'City of Angels' time to build an audience, let them find out when it's on and make it part of their time."

Then there was her best sitcom — "Getting Personal" on ABC.



"They moved us to Friday night which is TGIF — everybody knows that. They said, 'All you guys have to worry about is producing good shows. We know it's a tough time slot.' They gave us four weeks."

"There are no guarantees. I've been on great shows that have been cancelled, I've been on funny shows that have been cancelled. I've been on shows that — well, they deserved to be cancelled."

Fox can laugh about it now, but when "Arsenio" was dumped "it was a real big shocker; I was surprised and sad."

Still, she was glad to jump at "City of Angels" — even if it meant auditioning, something she'd left behind after shooting to success playing Will Smith's girlfriend in "Independence Day."

"I had to audition. Bummer. And my pride almost kept me from doing

it. 'What? I have to audition?' she says in mock diva anger. "It was a humbling experience, which was a good thing for me."

Now that they're in the midst of taping episode six, Fox knows she made the right decision.

"Steven is not afraid to make women powerful," she says. "We have women directors and women head writers. When I come on the set, I see people of color all around me."

And she's stretching her acting chops like never before.

"They don't sugarcoat things," says Fox, "which I really love — coming from sitcoms where you have to deliver almost every line with a smile. I get to sink my teeth into some deep stuff."

"In fact," she confesses, "I was doing all my lines with a smile. They said, 'Why are you trying to be so nice?' I said, 'Because I have to make my character likable.' They said, 'Screw likable. Do it.' I said, 'Okay!'"

As far as she's concerned, if the show makes any headway in adding a little color to primetime, it will simply be because it's good.

"The show is so well-written, well-directed, and well-acted," says Fox, who like most actresses has played a hooker (in "Born on the Fourth of July") and even a "stripper with a heart of gold" in "Independence Day."

"As an African American woman," she says, "roles like this you just don't see."