

ENTERTAINMENT

Reese trying to touch CBS' heart

By Della Reese
Special to Sentinel-Voice

After three years of some rather difficult shooting days of the series "Touched By An Angel," I decided that it was time to make working conditions part of my negotiation before the fourth season started.

Most of the conditions that I addressed affected the entire cast, and, of course, the crew. They were:

- Too many 14- and 16-hour work days. Considering that we were going into our senior year of production, it was paramount that the conditions suffered through the last three years, be corrected.

- Namely, poor scheduling, late script changes, were causing us to work as if this was a show in its first year of production. We could forgive emergencies causing this, but that was seldom the case.

- Too many unnecessary early calls. We could be called to the act and wait for hours in our trailers, before we worked. Again better scheduling would correct that.

- Because I'm a minister in Los Angeles, I needed to leave Salt Lake City, every Friday night at 10 p.m., in order to prepare my sermon for Sunday. I didn't care how early I had to go to work on Friday, just complete my day so I could catch the last flight. I further requested that I be allowed to return to Salt Lake City on Monday morning at 9.30 a.m. This gave me my weekend to prepare my sermon and take care of my church's business.

(Since I had fallen in February while being picked up to go to the set, and needed to have one hour of massage therapy each day for three weeks (only), the filming schedules were quickly changed to accommodate this. This showed me they could, with proper scheduling, end some of the excessive hours we had worked.)

Taking these points into the negotiations with CBS, we quickly came to an agreement, noting that only under dire circumstances would we have long hours. It was also agreed that as I had been contracted to write my autobiography by G.P. Putman & Sons, that I would be allowed to do a brief book tour of one week. This accommodation is usually given other stars writing books, though quite often they would have two weeks.

Though working conditions were my primary concern in that meeting, it was stated by my agents, and understood by CBS, that if Roma (my co-star) received a raise, then just like the last two years I would be expecting the same percentage raise.

Roma received her deserved raise after a very difficult fight, which was so surprising, since we had helped to make "Touched By An Angel" CBS's most popular and powerful drama in television's Top 10.

However, when my agents started discussing my equal raise, they were told that since I had received better working conditions,



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that I would only be given the normal 'bump' of five percent.

With persistence, my agents were able to get CBS up to only 12.5 percent, I was shocked. Because of the ever-growing success of the show, every year we re-negotiated our salaries, I was given the same percentage raise as my co-star, but now I was being penalized because I wanted to be treated with more consideration.

I sent a letter to Mr. Les Moonves, president of CBS Entertainment, telling him of my surprise at CBS's offer, and would he give more consideration of my value to our show. He didn't respond to me directly, but to my agents, saying that he was surprised that I got any raise at all.

So on Monday, Oct. 6th, (a day that I was given off because they had asked me to come to work earlier than usual the Monday before) I called a press conference at my church office. I discussed the issues, that my co-stars (Roma & John Dye) had received a 100 percent and 30 percent raise respectively, while mine was far below that. I was then informed that CBS was now offering a 25 percent raise, still below both co-stars, and not matching the usual percentage that Roma received.

It seems to me that I'm being doubly discriminated again: first because I fought for better working conditions, and secondly, as I'm the senior member of our cast, I must not have the same value in the network's plans to attract more 18-49 year-old viewers.

My only recourse is to present this to the media and the viewing audiences.

What has been CBS's response to the media? They consider the 25 percent raise a 'substantial raise.' My response? 'Compared to what?'

CBS said they had reduced my hours to make it better for my ministry. Now let's talk about the 'real of that statement:' I did not ask for my hours to be reduced. I asked that they not be 'abused' with excessively long days. Also, we only worked a five-day week, so that at the end of Friday, I should be able to go home or to my church for the weekend without being penalized for it.

CBS said that they have a good track record of hiring older lead actors, citing Bill Cosby and Dick Van Dyke. My response is that if either of these wonderful actors were in a top 10 show, I would gladly accept the salaries CBS would pay them.

It was brought to my attention that CBS says they stand on their record of using minorities in front of the camera. I applaud them as well as the entire television industry for this. But I don't consider this disrespect because I am Black, they knew I was Black when they hired me. This is 'financial disrespect,' where for some reason they find me less valuable by comparison.

Because of that press conference, many viewers have written to CBS asking them to be fair. That my value to them, as viewers, was strong enough for them to write has touched me greatly.

In similar situations, many television stars have threatened to walk off their shows. I can't walk off! I gave my word to God and CBS that I would do the job. I have tried to honor my word for the 60 years I've been a paid performer, and I can't change now.

But what can be done? I had received requests from groups, large and small, to boycott the show.

But that is not the thing to do! The real value of "Touched By An Angel" is the message of spirituality it gives to viewers each Sunday. The value is not in who owns the show or how they treat it. Keep watching the show! Ask friends to watch the show.

Perhaps when more people take to heart the principles of faith, love and generosity of spirit; perhaps when more people are aware of what's right and wrong, then perhaps, it will spread throughout the world....even to CBS.

What you can do is this: if you are an individual, write to your local CBS affiliate and tell them to "simply be fair to Della." If you represent an organization then write to:

Mr. Leslie Moonves
President, CBS Entertainment
7800 Beverly Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90036

Ask him to allow his network to follow the principles of fairness and generosity of spirit towards Della Reese, as expounded in the hit series "Touched By An Angel."

EBONY ETCHINGS

Reese's money squabbles boost ratings

By Warren Lanier Sr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When Della Reese went public with her statement of dissatisfaction over the vast difference in the amount of money she got for a raise, compared to the size of the raise given her co-star on the weekly network show "Touched By An Angel," she sure started something.

Ever since Reese aired her dissatisfaction publicly, audience interest in the show increased tremendously and for the first time in its third full season on the air, "Touched By An Angel" reached its highest ratings ever the other week and helped CBS tie NBC in the television war ratings. Let's hear it for Reese who put it on the line for the right! And let's also hope that the network realizes her going public over equality in pay was a blessing in disguise that stirred up enough wind to help the show soar to the top. Need we say more?

As we reported in last week's 'Ebony Etchings,' "Cinderella" starring Brandy Norwood, Whitney Houston and Whoopi Goldberg produced a ratings smash that led to ABC getting its first weekly win of the television

season attracting some 60-million viewers.

Now the Walt Disney Company has announced that it will release the made-for-television movie "Cinderella" starring the trio on video. The planned release date for this home video that will lead the release parade of other made-for-television movie projects from the "Wonderful World of Disney" airing on Sunday nights, will be in January.

Lynn Whitfield, currently starring in the Samuel L. Jackson produced movie "Eve's Bayou," will be going into production and starring in her own big screen biopic of Angela Davis next year.

Clement Virgo of Canada will direct the project and they're now working on the final draft of the script. Even though the plot will cover the passions and political positions of Davis, Whitfield and Virgo will be going after the love story interest between the '60s female radical and George Jackson of the Black Panthers.

Laurence Fishburne gets the nod as her first choice to play Jackson ... and that's Hollywood this time!!



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