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Observers say blacks playing in more TV roles

HOLLYWOOD (AP) — More blacks are appearing on prime time television shows, and not just in stereotypical roles as cute kids, domestic workers, criminals and jive-talking comedians, according to industry researchers and observers.

"There has been an improvement in the employment of black performers and the range of character portrayals has improved," said Rodney Mitchell, affirmative action administrator for the Screen Actors Guild. "No longer are they confined to street types, non-professionals, crime victims and crime perpetrators."

Some credit the success of "The Cosby Show" for opening the doors to more positive black portrayals. A recent Howard University study of 58 black characters in 26 network shows last season found that, instead of the lower class roles that dominated the 1970s, "blacks on television are generally portrayed as belonging to middle and upper classes."

Women played nearly half of the black roles, compared to previous years when men greatly outnumbered them, the Howard researchers reported. The study also noted more middle-age and elderly black characters, fewer obese women and more characters portrayed as competent.

Some things haven't changed, the Howard scholars found. Blacks were still more likely to be cast in situation comedies than dramas and were most often supporting or minor characters. More than half appeared in shows with black themes, such as "Amen," "Cosby," "227" and "A Different World."

"Black characters continue to be cast primarily in all-black settings," wrote Howard communication researchers Carolyn Stroman, Bishetta Merritt and Paula Matabane. "Yet there is a notable difference in that these all-black settings tend to be upscale middle class rather than low income."

A 1987 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., found that the number of black characters on TV rose slowly from 1955 to 1965, when only one in 20 was black, and more rapidly since 1975, when one character in 11 has been black. Over the 31 years studied, blacks played 6 percent of all roles.

"The civil rights movement... opened up attitudes," Dan Amundson, study co-author, said. "White audiences will watch black performers in a wide range of roles, based on

"Black characters continue to be cast primarily in all-black settings. Yet there is a notable difference in that these all-black settings tend to be upscale middle class rather than low income."

— Communication researchers

the quality of the show, rather than the racial question."

SAG's Mitchell credits union affirmative action pressures, advocacy by minority rights groups and the success of black-themed shows for the increasing number of roles. And new shows such as "Frank's Place" and "In the Heat of the Night" provided dramatic parts for blacks last season, he said.

Black viewers have become more important in the 1980s as overall network audiences dropped in competition with VCRs and cable. But Mitchell said he had never heard industry officials say they were improving black roles to attract more black viewers.

More blacks watch television than do other racial groupings, according to Nielsen audience data. A recent Nielsen viewing analysis reported that television usage averaged 10.6 hours per day in black households, versus 7.3 hours daily in all other homes.

With just 11 percent of U.S. television homes headed by blacks, viewing patterns would have to change markedly to directly affect program portrayals, CBS television research Vice President Arnold Becker said.

Even with more viewing "they're still a minority group" in the TV audience, Becker said. "If blacks really viewed dramatically different programs than non-blacks then they would have a very substantial effect. But they generally view not all that dissimilarly than the rest of the population."

Becker, instead of attributing gains in black roles to changing television economics, said white Americans were more receptive to mainstream black characters.

"The attitude of the world toward blacks has changed," he said. "People out there are predisposed to accept this kind of social change."

Official archivist knows the facts from 'Star Trek'

LOS ANGELES (AP) — When creator Gene Roddenberry has a question about "Star Trek" the man he turns to is Richard Arnold.

The information about "Star Trek," and the lore amassed over the past 22 years, is so vast that only the most dedicated Trekkie could possibly keep track of it.

Arnold has been the show's official archivist at Paramount Studios for the past two years, but for nearly nine years before that he was an unpaid but virtually full-time consultant.

"I might get a call from a game show asking which cast member first said, 'Beam me up, Scotty,'" Arnold said. "No one ever said that on any 'Star Trek' episode. The fans made it up, like 'Play it again, Sam.'"

"I frequently get calls from merchandising and licensing. They'll want to know what actor played such-and-such a character and how can they get hold of him to sign a waiver. Television stations call a lot asking for help in designing a promotion campaign."

Arnold emphasized, however, that he is not the final word on the show. "I'm a consultant," he said. "I'm not hanging over anyone's shoulders. They can consult me or not."

"Star Trek" made its debut on NBC in 1966 and ran for three years. It has also been an animated series, four hit motion pictures have been made and a fifth is in the works, and the new TV series "Star Trek: The Next Generation" is an enormous hit in syndication.

"I was 12 years old when 'Star Trek' began," Arnold said. "I'd gone through 'The Hardy Boys,' even my sisters 'Nancy Drew' books, and Edgar Rice Burroughs had gotten me into science fiction. I remember I spent one summer in a tent in the backyard reading. My mother thought there was something wrong with that."

"On TV I'd watched 'Lost in Space,' 'Voyage To the Bottom of the Sea,' and 'Time Tunnel.' Then

"I might get a call from a game show asking which cast member first said, 'Beam me up, Scotty.' No one ever said that on any 'Star Trek' episode. The fans made it up, like 'Play it again, Sam.'"

— Star Trek archivist
Richard Arnold

"Star Trek" came on. The first episode intrigued me. The next episode was so good, I cried at the end. After that I scheduled my life around watching 'Star Trek.' I watched the shows over and over and over again. My mother couldn't understand that. I asked her if she ever went back to the same restaurant."

His mother, incidentally, finally began watching and was soon an avid "Star Trek" fan herself.

Arnold, who was born in the same hospital in Vancouver, Canada, as Jimmy Doohan (Scotty), ran a "Star Trek" fan club in high school and college. He moved from Canada to St. Louis in 1969 and went to his first science fiction convention with a cousin in downtown St. Louis.

"It changed my whole life," he said. "I went to the first 'Star Trek' convention in New York in 1971. I met Gene Roddenberry there and he was very kind to me. But I didn't know who he was until he was introduced at the convention."

Next up is the fifth "Star Trek" movie, which was postponed when Leonard Nimoy accepted an offer from Disney to direct Diane Keaton and Jason Robards in "The Good Mother."

The tentative start date for "Star Trek V: The Final Frontier" is Sept. 12. William Shatner will direct. Harve Bennett will produce.

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