

TICHINA ARNOLD

Seriously Funny

SITCOM STAR'S DRAMATIC TURN

Best known for her stints in several sitcoms, most notably *Martin* and *Everybody Hates Chris*, Tichina Arnold is one funny lady. But the New York City-born actress can handle any role—even portraying Lena Baker, who was accused of killing a white man and unjustly sentenced to die in Georgia's electric chair. Tichina stopped by HUSTLER to discuss *Hope & Redemption: The Lena Baker Story*, working with Martin Lawrence and Chris

Rock and starting a band. (She sings too!)
HUSTLER: A lot of celebrities are too scared to be interviewed by HUSTLER, yet here you are. What made you decide to do this?

TICHINA ARNOLD: I was in shock that I was asked. Initially I was like, "Whoa! Hey! I don't know." Then I was happy and got excited. Then I thought, *How does this work with my image?* I play moms and all that stuff. I went back and

forth until I realized this is a part of being an actress. HUSTLER is a part of the media I've never been exposed to. As an actress you want to reach as many audiences as possible. I'm not showing nipples. So why not?

So, no nipples?
You show me your nipples first! (Laughs.)

Since you're known for your comedic acting what drew you to such a serious project as Lena Baker's story?

Because *Hope & Redemption* had no comedy in it whatsoever. I liked the fact that it was going to be a new challenge for me. Plus I'd always wanted to play the life of somebody else. To me, comedy is second nature. It is something that I do without thought. I've had some little dramatic roles or dramatic moments in my career, but I've never had the opportunity to dive in and envelop a character who actually walked this Earth. That was a great challenge.

How do you play a real person as opposed to making up a character?

I didn't read the biography of Lena Baker by Lela Bond, which the film is based on, because I didn't want to have any preconceived notions of what I thought she was until I could bring her to life. I wanted to start with a clean slate. I just focused on the script. I always say that my job is to bring the black-and-white—the script—to life.

Once you started to portray Baker, did you like her?

I felt bad for her. This woman had been sexually, mentally and physically abused. There were so many negative things in her life. On top of that she was a single mother, and she had been on a chain gang chained to men for ten months. Can you imagine that? I went through all of these different emotions as we made the movie. Luckily, though, as an actress, once I leave the set, I leave that pain and emotion behind. Because it's too heavy.

Why was Baker drawn to the man who abused her and whom she eventually killed in self-defense?

She was an alcoholic, and when you have a weakness, it can be exploited. The dynamic between Lena Baker and Mr. Arthur, who was played by Peter Coyote, was interesting. Lena and Mr. Arthur's alcoholism brought them together, as did their loneliness. But in the 1940s it was unheard of for a black woman to be with a white man, legally living together. A white man could do whatever he wanted to a black woman as his concubine, but they could not live together. Mr. Arthur held her captive. I think he was a little nuts. The hardest part to play was that dynamic. Even though Lena hated him, there was still that connection that no one can really ever explain.

There are some intense scenes in *Hope & Redemption*. What was the hardest one for you?

The hardest scene was the last time Lena could see her kids, but she couldn't tell them that it would be the last time and that she was going to be put to death in the electric chair. Even thinking about that scene right now still brings tears to my eyes because it made me think about my own daughter. I put myself in Lena Baker's shoes at that point. It was the

moment where you're trying to be strong for someone else. I could not let my children see me weak. That scene tore me apart.

What do you think would have happened to Lena Baker if she had been arrested in 2011 and not 1944?

She would have been acquitted. Actually, the funny thing was that she was pardoned after all these years. She didn't get a fair trial. She was supposed to be tried by a jury of her peers. Her jury was 12 [white] men who lived with each other in a boarding house and drank moonshine together. Not fair. I'm really happy I had the chance to tell her story.

Is there anyone else you'd like to play?

I would love to play the life of Nina Simone. I love her music. Plus I heard that Nina Simone was a hoot and that her mouth was as bad as mine. (Laughs.)

You started out as one of the girl singers in *Little Shop of Horrors*; what do you remember about making that film?

I was so excited to be working with the voice of Miss Piggy. Frank Oz, who directed the film, was also the voice of Miss Piggy, dude! No joke. I was also excited to be working with Steve Martin. I was in a makeup-and-wardrobe trailer with Steve. He's at one side of the honey wagon putting on his dentist uniform while Tisha [Campbell] and Michelle [Weeks] and I are at the other end getting dressed. One side of the trailer was on wheels while the other side was on cinder blocks.

All of a sudden we heard something fall. A block fell, and the whole trailer shifted, and we tumbled on Steve Martin. At least I got to touch him! (Laughs.) It was such a great experience. I was 15 years old, and we were living in London for a whole year. I flew over there on the Concorde. Getting to work with Steve Martin, John Candy, Rick Moranis, Bill Murray, Ellen Greene—all these really amazing people made me a better performer.

That was also the first time you worked with Tisha Campbell. Did that lead to you being co-stars on *Martin* years later?

I was doing this play called *The Buddy Holly Story*, and I was over it. I said, "If I hear one more Big Bopper tune, I'm going to kill myself." Theater had always been my love, but after six months on tour with that show, I was done. I wanted to do a sitcom. So I asked myself, *if I move to Los Angeles and nothing happens, will I regret leaving the play?*

As soon as I answered myself No, I was on the next thing out to L.A. I flew MGM Airlines and spent \$1,500 on a one-way ticket. I lived with Tisha for a few months. Martin [Lawrence] had already asked Tisha to be on the show, but he didn't know that Tisha and I knew each other. I told her I wanted to audi-

tion for it and not get special treatment. I went through proper channels.

By that time I had tested for three pilots. I didn't really want to do Martin. I was up for this pilot called *CCPD* with Dan Aykroyd and a sketch comedy show called *Main Street*, which was what I really wanted. Well, the first two didn't happen, so everything happens for a reason.

Your character (Pamela Jones) and Martin's were always fighting on the show. What was your relationship like in real life?

It was so much fun. With Martin you didn't know what the hell was going to come out of his mouth. You just went with it. Half the stuff we did wasn't written in the script. I tell people all the time that the unfortunate thing is that the TV audience missed out on all of the stuff that got cut. The stuff that we would say off camera was hilarious. We were bad. Our mouths were foul. We would just do stupid stuff on the set all day. Slap the food out of each other's hands. Working on *Martin*, we came to work to laugh every day.

But in the later seasons it wasn't so much fun.

It got rough.

Was Martin Lawrence mentally ill back then?

You'll find with a lot of comedians, it's hard. I'm not a stand-up comedian. That is one thing that I will never attempt. It's like being your own team. I like being on a team and being part of a cast of people. I like playing off people, but with stand-up you are out there alone. If you bomb, you bomb. So a lot of comedians have it hard.

From comedy comes a lot of tragedy. You're really laughing about what you should cry about. Then you make it. Martin was one of the guys who made it, and he deserved success. On the outside he finally realized all of his dreams: the money, the cars, the house. But nobody knows what's going on on the inside. Are you really happy? Nobody knows what's going on with you except you. We didn't really know much about what was going on with him inside. I'm just happy that he got through a rough moment in his life and that he triumphed.

You've worked with Lawrence in two films, *Big Momma's House* and *Wild Hogs*. What's the relationship like nowadays?

All good. I love Martin. I still talk to the family and still see him from time to time. I will always thank Martin. I will always appreciate him for making me a better comedic actress. I hope to work with him more. We were supposed to do a *Wild Hogs* sequel, but it didn't happen.

Is Martin your favorite gig?

For television? Yeah. *Everybody Hates Chris* is too, but it's a different dynamic. On *Martin* I was single. On *Everybody Hates Chris* I was a single mom. On *Martin* I was