

CELEBRITIES

Tucker had personal 'Air' connection

By Rodney Ho

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Chris Tucker is super picky when it comes to doing movies.

Since "Rush Hour 3" in 2007, he has taken roles in just two films: 2012's "Silver Linings Playbook" and 2016's "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk."

But Tucker is finally back on the silver screen, this time playing real-life Nike executive Howard White in the Ben Affleck film "Air," now in theaters. It's based on the story of how Nike persuaded NBA star Michael Jordan in 1984 to sign with them instead of rivals Adidas and Converse, shifting the sports marketing universe.

Tucker said he heard from his agent that Affleck wanted him for this role, and he realized White was someone he knew from Jordan's charity golf tournaments.

"Howard helped build Jordan's brand," Tucker said. "When he signed the deal with Nike, Nike put Howard with Michael almost like a chaperone. They needed someone he could relate to. Howard is an ex-basketball player, an All-American in college who blew out his knee. He became an executive and is a great guy all around."

Tucker called White and told him he was playing him in the movie. White provided Tucker contacts from his life, and Tucker went all out in his research, contacting 30 of White's family members, friends, work colleagues and coaches.

The original "Air" script, Tucker said, didn't feature much of White, so Tucker added dialogue for his character and fleshed him out. "It was all me," Tucker said. "Ben then structured it and made it work."

Tucker said Affleck was like a player-coach in the movie since he not only produced and directed



Chris Tucker, seen March 27, plays Nike executive Howard White in the Ben Affleck film "Air." **JON KOPALOFF/GETTY**

"Air" but also played Nike founder and CEO Phil Knight. Matt Damon portrays Sonny Vaccaro, the Nike marketing executive who persuaded Knight to gamble on Jordan.

"He and Matt came into my trailer and said, 'Hey, we're just going to have fun making this. It's like friends having fun,'" Tucker said. "They told me to relax and figure it out. It was awesome. Ben was on it and moving and moving. I was trusting him. We just kept going."

"Air" was self-contained, mostly set in the Nike offices. Tucker said it reminded him of shooting "Friday" in 1995. "We did 'Friday' on one street with a couple of soundstage scenes," he said. "I love character-based movies like this."

Tucker was 13 years old when Air Jordans debuted in April 1985.

"I was in sixth grade, and I had to save up money,"

he said. "Thank God my dad had his own business, Tucker Cleaning Service, so I could work."

Tucker thinks his first Jordans purchase was the second version that came out in 1986, not the original ones featured in the movie.

"People consider these shoes art," Tucker said of the sneakers. "One time I went to a Bentley factory in London ... and I appreciated my car more. Once I did this movie, I appreciated my Air Jordans that much more. It brings back great memories."

April 30 birthdays: Actor Burt Young is 83. Singer Merrill Osmond is 70. Director Jane Campion is 69. Singer Jeff Timmons is 50. Actor Johnny Galecki is 48. Actor Sam Heughan is 43. Actor Kunal Nayyar is 42. Rapper Lloyd Banks is 41. Actor Kirsten Dunst is 41. Actor Dianna Agron is 37. Rapper Travis Scott is 32.

HOROSCOPES

Tarot.com

Aries (March 21-April 19):

Low energy can make things seem worse than they are. You might begin with some despair, but you may simply be exhausted. Eating a meal, taking a shower and getting some sleep could be all you need to turn things around. Give yourself some rest before getting back to the grind.

Taurus (April 20-May 20):

Fears may be dramatized. Catastrophizing any action that you take is a pitfall for you now. It's easier to see the potential negative outcomes from your actions than the positive ones. Take the initiative, because your vision won't be brought to life without you.

Gemini (May 21-June 20):

Trying to adhere to tradition might be holding you back. You could be trying to live up to a standard, but that may bog you down. The standards of the people who are important to us are worth exploring, but if they're not for you, then you have to take the path less traveled.

Cancer (June 21-July 22):

Healthy competition is one thing, but always comparing yourself to others isn't beneficial. You might be learning everything you can to change yourself. Leaning into your talents should help you feel more authentic. Find ways that you and the people around you are already alike and appreciate your strengths.

Leo (July 23-Aug. 22):

Security can currently feel claustrophobic. You may have made a conscious decision that allowed you to progress toward your future. Even so, you might worry that you've made the wrong choice. Maybe in the past you couldn't have handled this, but you can get the job done.

Virgo (Aug. 23-Sept. 22):

Life can feel like it's you versus them right now. A disagreement could make you feel shut out. Going to the other person with a willingness to learn from your mistakes is the most authentic way to end this disagreement. Your connection means more than being right or wrong.

Libra (Sept. 23-Oct. 22):

Anxiety can color your viewpoint now. What's really going on and what you think is going on might be two different circumstances entirely. The people around you may be exacerbating your anxiety instead of helping. Finding your center will make all those worries melt away.

Scorpio (Oct. 23-Nov. 21):

Loneliness might find you in a crowd of people. You may feel different from the other people in a group, leading you to doubt or talk down to yourself, but try contemplating the idea that you're retreating. You might be withdrawing out of self-judgment. Once you open up, you could make new friends.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22-Dec. 21):

Authority figures may hurt your feelings. You might have been scolded or shown disappointment from someone like your parents. While it would be easy to let their mood dictate your feelings, it's wiser to fix as much as you can today and try again next time.

Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19):

Your mindset might be based on some faulty knowledge. You possibly believe things about yourself that were told to you, but this may have been misinformation. Unlearning this knowledge can let you look at yourself through a new lens. Don't box yourself in.

Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18):

Self-isolation is frequently a self-fulfilling prophecy. You may have guarded your heart for good reason, but doing so also blocks you from potential friendships and opportunities to connect with people who will be positive influences. Open your heart, because connections can last.

Pisces (Feb. 19-March 20):

Someone could be about to desert you. They may have insulted you, and while that does hurt, remind yourself that they're actually telling you something about themselves. They might be trying to make you feel lonely because they themselves feel alone. Not everyone will let you in, but at least you tried.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Associated Press

On April 30, 1803, the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France for the equivalent of about \$15 million.

In 1900, engineer John Luther "Casey" Jones of

the Illinois Central Railroad died in a train wreck near Vaughan, Mississippi, after staying at the controls in a successful effort to save the passengers.

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed a resolution officially confirming the name of Hoover Dam, which had also come to be known as "Boulder Dam."

In 1970, President Rich-

ard Nixon announced the U.S. was sending troops into Cambodia, an action that sparked widespread protest.

In 1993, top-ranked women's tennis player Monica Seles was stabbed in the back during a match in Hamburg, Germany, by a man who described himself as a fan of second-ranked German player Steffi Graf.

Longevity sign of TV success for Thede

Her vision for 'Black Lady Sketch Show' carries into Season 4

By Gary Gerard Hamilton

Associated Press

Success in television can be measured in many ways, but one of Robin Thede's sure tell signs is longevity.

"A Season 4 is a testament to the most appreciation, right? Because we've seen a lot of great shows — I've created a lot of great shows — that don't last as long. And it's not for lack of quality," said the creator and star of "A Black Lady Sketch Show." "There's so many options that you have today on TV. So, the fact that people want to spend six episodes with us is great."

HBO's hit show that airs Fridays recently returned, positioned to be bigger and more expansive than ever. The three-time, Emmy-winning show welcomes new cast members, DaMya Gurley, Tamara Jade and Angel Laketa Moore, to its hilarious foundation of Thede, Gabrielle Dennis and Skye Townsend.

"My vision was to allow the most voices as possible to create this plethora of Black lady voices that lead to what the show is now, and honestly, it's become bigger than me," said Thede.

Supported by a staff of women of color in all departments, Thede is grateful for the fanfare, but she also expected it, saying she never heard naysayers remark that a sketch series by Black women, primarily for — but not limited to — Black women, would fail. "No one ever said that. ... I guess maybe that should've happened. We

also were so cocky about it. We're like, 'This is going to be great!' Our only goal was excellence," said Thede of her and fellow executive producer Issa Rae. "I've always gone, 'This is the greatest show on earth! Why wouldn't someone want to be here?' ... I just think the concept of it was so dope that people were already on board, and they wanted to support."

This fourth season shies away from its previous mysterious, dark twist sketches and moves toward big laugh-in-your-face comedy. Part of the magic resides in guest stars, and this season boasts names such as Tracee Ellis Ross, Colman Domingo, Jay Ellis and Kym Whitley, while past guests like Rae, Yvette Nicole Brown and Jackee Harry return.

The Second City alum says Oscar nominee Angela Bassett, who displayed her comedic chops in the first season, helped show the series is safe and fun for all actors. While Thede doesn't hold auditions for guest spots, she frequently taps into her entertainment network and friends, saying recruiting is among the easiest parts of the gig.

The writers room — which features all Black women with a wide array of life experiences, backgrounds and viewpoints — begins each season with about 100 ideas and whittles it down to around 30 to form the season.

Thede says the show stays funny by "keeping the voices fresh, keeping the cast fresh, much to some people's dismay," she



Robin Thede, seen April 5, is the star and creator of the HBO series "A Black Lady Sketch Show." **GARY GERARD HAMILTON/AP**

said with a laugh. "I want this to be a place where people don't stay forever. I want this to be a place that's the jump-off to your next thing."

So far, it has worked: Emmy winner and "Abbott Elementary" creator Quinta Brunson starred in Season 1, and Ashley Nicole Black went on to win an Emmy for "Ted Lasso."

"A Black Lady Sketch Show" brought home two Emmy awards for last season: outstanding directing for a variety series and a second consecutive win for outstanding picture editing for variety programming.

Raised in Iowa and named after comedian Robin Williams, Thede graduated from Northwestern in Illinois with a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism. She landed the head writer position for "The Queen Latifah Show," and hosted a short-lived, BET late-night program, "The Rundown with Robin Thede." She was the head writer on "The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore," becoming the first Black woman to hold that role on any late-night talk show. She has also written

for various awards shows, as well as comics such as Chris Rock, Kevin Hart and Mike Epps.

While Black female sketch comics are scarce now, they were even more rare when Thede was growing up. She credits Whoopi Goldberg for showing her what might be possible, which she tearfully shared with the iconic performer recently on "The View."

Thede was also inspired by funnywoman Kim Wayans from "In Living Color," the groundbreaking '90s sketch show featuring a primarily Black cast. Thede, who says the show was "pivotal" for her, was touched when Wayans said "A Black Lady Sketch Show" is forging a path similar to what the legendary Wayans did.

"She told me she was proud of me ... That just means so much to me to have my heroes, my role models say to me, 'You did it, and you're doing it, and you're that for the next generation,'" recalled Thede. "My hope is that eventually, no one has to go on 'The View' and cry to Whoopi and tell her thank you ... They'll say, 'Oh, there were so many Black women doing it, of course,

I could do it.'"

Happy to no longer be engulfed in the 24-hour-news cycle of late-night shows, Thede is in the early stages of developing "Disengagement," an HBO comedy that centers on a Black family in the Midwest, and will star in the upcoming holiday film "Candy Cane Lane" with Eddie Murphy.

While she hopes to pursue more film roles, her priority is making sure "A Black Lady Sketch Show" eases the road to Hollywood for those behind her.

"The institution of 'A Black Lady Sketch Show' is so great because it will live on beyond all of us ... Dozens and dozens of Black women and other women of color have put Emmy nominee and/or Emmy winner in front of their name because of this show," said Thede. "I don't want me to be the singular person who's done these things. I don't want them to be as impressed (with me) as I am with the few who came before me. I want them to be like, 'Yeah, you were good, and now I'm going to be better.' That's the whole point: surpass everything I've done, and hire me when I'm old and gray."

Brabson

from Page 1

following the life arc of Brabson's mother, Annie. But Brabson refrained from divulging details about her mother's experience of memory-related illness, out of a desire to sidestep simple categorization.

"Her life — or anyone's life — is not summed up with a label," she said.

She's performed "Resilience & Joy, A Cabaret" already, including outdoors, on a porch in New Jersey.

In Baltimore, Theatre Project offers her a space for storytelling in front of new crowds; the venue has a "black box feel, so it can become what you want it to become," Brabson said.

"What's lovely is when you come into a space and the welcome is warm," she added. "As much as I want it to be thought-provoking, I swear I want people to laugh and to just tap their toes and maybe even go down memory lane with some of the music," which will include hits from The Jackson 5 and The 5th Dimension.

Michael Brabson, Ami's older brother who lives in Bowie, recalled that at their late father's funeral, the family sang songs "that we used to sing when we were in the back seat of a station wagon growing up," at his sister's direction.

"It's captivating," he said of his sister's voice. "She is what I would call a dynamic singer. Because of her acting background, she's able to put feeling into the lyrics."

At Theatre Project, Pfungsten is betting on the show striking a chord with audience members.

"It's brand new, you never know how it's going to turn out," he said. "We're sharing in the risk, and hopefully there's reward afterward."

IF YOU GO

"Resilience & Joy, A Cabaret" is April 30 at Theatre Project, 45 W. Preston St., Baltimore. Tickets are \$30 at theatreproject.org.