



she's just
DRAWN THA

tia CARRERE

Don't bother trying to find decent Chinese food in Slovakia. The former Czechoslovakian nation is renowned more for its steel and cement than its Pu Pu Platters. Just ask Tia Carrere. In Slovakia while filming Universal's "Kull the Conqueror," the actress is jonesing for a good take-out restaurant. "You come here," she says from her hotel room, "and you've got Hungarian goulash, you have hamburgers, and you have really just marginal Chinese food that I would probably send back in Los Angeles but I'm thankful to have here. In Los Angeles, you have Thai, Indian, Chinese, sushi ..." Her voice trails off as she considers the various comestibles that are possible in the States.

Carrere herself is as diverse as the palatable fare offered here. She describes her heritage as part Hawaiian, part Chinese, part Spanish and part Filipino. And, like the Chinese food in Slovakia, this can be a bummer as well as a blessing.

Discovered by a producer's parents in a Honolulu grocery store, Carrere came to the U.S. mainland a decade ago to launch her acting career. She is best known as the exotic beauty who tangoed with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the blockbuster film "True Lies," and the rock 'n' roller girlfriend to Mike Myers' goofy title character in "Wayne's World." Despite her success, Carrere often finds her heterogeneous looks to be a hindrance in Hollywood.

"It's difficult being different than people's concepts of the American girl next door," she says. "It's a shame because I still do hear, you know, 'we don't want to go

Commanding Presence: Tia Carrere with Kevin Sorbo in "Kull the Conqueror."



PIERRE VINET/ UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

AT WAY

By Laura Schiff

ethnic with that role.' Everybody is friggin' ethnic in America. It does become frustrating. I mean, there's very few Asian actresses that can even make their way in the business, and me being sort of in-between races, you know? Not Chinese enough, and too ethnic, and too attractive to be, you know, native. Although we're in the '90s, it's still very small-minded in some ways. I personally think the girl next door, as time goes on, will look more and more like me."

It was Carrere's desire to break out of her stereotypically Asian roles that finally prompted her to start her own production company, Phoenician Films. Along with her co-producer-husband, Elie Samaha, Carrere is working to change America's perceptions regarding Asians on the silver screen. Phoenician's first project, the surprisingly good, low-budget thriller called "The Immortals," featured Carrere as a pregnant felon who's dying of breast cancer. In Phoenician's most recent

film, "Frankie The Fly," Carrere stars opposite Dennis Hopper, Keiffer Sutherland and Darryl Hannah as "a junkie prostitute." Says the actress, "I feel like I've been able to really diversify my roles, despite my Asian heritage. It's disappointing and maddening at times, but, hopefully, by the things that I've been doing, and our company will continue to do, I'll be able to push through that."

To that end, Carrere starred in TriStar Pictures' wacky, "High School High," with Jon Lovitz. The film was produced by David Zucker of "Airplane!" and

"The Naked Gun" fame and directed by Hart Bochner ("PSU"). In it, Lovitz plays an unflappably optimistic teacher at Marion Barry High, the toughest inner-city high school this side of Hell's Kitchen. Carrere is Victoria Chappell, the eternally peppy administrative assistant who falls in love with Lovitz's Mr. Clark. Together, they clean up Marion Barry High and make a difference in the lives of the school's misguided students. All of this is set against a backdrop of drug-sniffing dogs, metal detectors and enough home-brewed explosives to rankle the hearts of chemistry teachers everywhere.

In one scene, Carrere finds herself held at knife-point in

Carrere often finds her heterogeneous looks to be a hindrance in Hollywood.

the school library by gang leader Paco (played by the very intense Guillermo Diaz). Her efforts to free herself are thwarted by her bumbling savior, Mr. Clark. Carrere winds up face down in a fish tank, nearly drowned by Lovitz's best intentions. "That was so funny!" Carrere laughs as she recalls filming the scene. "It was the fish tank that killed me! Water up your nose. I don't care if it's bottled water or whatever; water up your nose hurts. And, you know, there's nothing you can do. It's like, okay, and take a breath, and dunk your head in the water! And, of course, it was that long slow dolly, so I had to wait (until) they finally went past. I went, you know, pulled my head up and went ... !" She takes a huge gasp of air and laughs.

Carrere's own high school years were relatively serene. She attended the all-girls Sacred Heart Academy in Honolulu. Of her time there, she says, "It was good because it wasn't so distracting, not having to get all dolled up and worry about looking too smart or too stupid in front of the guys." Carrere admits that she wasn't very popular in high school. "I sort of kept to myself," she says. "People thought I was in my own world or something. Because my uniform used to be a little sloppy, and I really didn't pay much attention to mismatched socks. I thought I was cooler than that, but my sister told me that people used to think I was aloof and kind of odd because I didn't really hang out with anybody." She remembers one run-in she had with the nuns at Sacred Heart. "I entered a talent contest once and got a lot of flack for the costumes we were wearing. Because they thought they were a little risqué. They were like these body suits, with the top hats and the canes and the dance shoes, the fishnets. And the leotards we wore were really not that high cut, but we got in a lot of trouble for it."

As it happens, trouble is something in which Carrere would like to find herself more often. She's fascinated by the dark side of humanity and would relish the chance to explore this aspect of her personality more fully. Her dream role? A "total skanky, screwed up, punk rock chick with her own underground music, and she dies of an overdose in the end." She cites "Sid & Nancy" and "Leaving Las Vegas" as two of her favorite films. When asked why she's so enthralled with all things morbid, she replies, "Because I'm so doggone chipper and optimistic—you know, friendly to a fault—and I think it would be great to just put all that politeness and cheeriness aside and really dig deep and get ugly."

Tia Carrere? Ugly? Try selling that idea to the legions of fans who consider her to be a sex symbol. Carrere scoffs at this idea. "I'm not really a sex symbol. They just make me into it in the movies. You know, the dream girl lighting and everything. I think that's the way I was painted. It's sort of like ..." Here she adopts a come-hither drawl, à la Jessica Rabbit, "I'm not bad. I'm



Close-Up: In the slapstick comedy "High School High," Carrere plays the chipper Victoria Chappell.

just drawn that way.”

She's not against sex symbols, however. "If somebody that looks like me—different—can be the sex symbol, the girl of somebody's dream, then that's cool. I mean, really, there's the sex symbols that are blonde and blue-eyed, and then African Americans have their movie stars like Halle Berry. The magazines, when they go ethnic, they go with models who are Spanish-looking, or part black, or something. Not many Asian supermodels. I sort of come in between all of that."

True or not, Carrere is skittish about appearing nude in her films and uses a body double when the situation calls for it. "It's always in my contract

not to have nudity," she says, "because I think those are the things that come back and bite you on the ass. With having a body double, I can distance myself. That wasn't me. Everybody's got their own ideas on that. I just don't want to do it myself." Carrere mentions the fan mail she receives from ethnic-looking girls who look up to her as a role model. "It's a lot of responsibility. But I think if I can just make it cool to be somebody who looks different, so that if you're a girl, coming up and looking a little different than the girls on the cover of the magazines or on the commercials, then maybe it'll make them feel good about themselves and how different they are."

With the dawning of a new millennium within sight, Carrere is hopeful that the future will be more tolerant toward Asian Americans and other minorities. "It's starting," she says. "It's just starting in the past couple of years, I think. It's changing. Maybe we're the next group to come up." ■

Laura Schiff is a free-lance writer in Los Angeles, California.

TRISTAR PICTURES

TIA UNPLUGGED

By Laarni C. Almendrala

It's not a good day, automotively speaking, for Tia Carrere. The new car she and her husband of five years, Elie Samaha, recently purchased had to be brought to a mechanic to check the strange sounds coming from the fan belt.

"They quoted me \$2,500," she groans, disbelieving. "We just got this car. Doggone it! That's ridiculous."

Coming from Carrere, it's a strangely ordinary gripe to have in what many consider a fairy-tale existence. But the star of such blockbuster films as "Wayne's World" and "True Lies" is the first to admit that the entertainment industry can be the slick-talking, butt-kissing, back-stabbing Babylon that the public pictures it to be.

"You really have to choose your friends carefully and keep in touch with your family and your heritage and the things that ground you to the earth," she says. "There's always somebody more successful, that has more stuff, and if you get into that, you'll never be fulfilled."

Sweet Dreams

Carrere's efforts to keep it real in Hollywood stand in contrast to her childhood dreams of fame. Born Althea Dujenio Janairo, Carrere nurtured a burning ambition to have a singing career even as a little girl growing up in Kalihi, Hawaii.

"My grandmother took me to my first singing lesson when I was 11," she recounts. "I entered every talent contest that came along."

But singing wasn't the only thing that absorbed Carrere during her childhood. Family was, and continues to be, very important in her life. Kalihi's sizable Filipino community guaranteed a childhood steeped in many of the traditions of her parents' heritage. Her father, Alexander, hails from Cebu, while her mother Audrey's grandmother was Filipino. Carrere's the eldest of three kids, which includes sisters Audra and Sandra. Carrere says that of all the Filipino traditions that pervaded her household, it's the cuisine



Vamp—Not: Carrere refuses to bare it all.

that's firmly embedded in her memories.

"The most fun was rolling *lumpia*," she relates. "I was fascinated with it. You had a conveyor belt of food, and you had the chopped celery, carrots, shrimps, beef and chicken, and everybody put one scoop in the wrapper and sealed it with the egg. I thought that was so neat."

She also remembers the grand Filipino