

Coy Stewart, Essence Atkins, Terry Crews, Teala Dunn and Ice Cube, the Kingston-Persons family on *Are We There Yet?*



The TBS hit comedy *Are We There Yet?* may take place in Seattle, but the production's home is Stamford, in a studio constantly abuzz with activity and making TV history every day

by CHRIS HODENFIELD

VERY FUNNY



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left: A camera operator prepares to shoot a scene with cast members. below: Terry Crews as Nick Kingston-Persons rehearses with Christian Finnegan, who plays his best friend, Martin.



above: Ice Cube, one of the show's executive producers, rehearses for his part as Terrence, overprotective brother to Suzanne Kingston-Persons, Essence Atkins's character.

Terry Crews was a linebacker on the NFL for seven seasons. With a taut, six-foot-two frame wrapped in muscle, he looks like he could easily lay waste to the opposition, even though he retired from

the game fourteen years ago. But his fight right now is all in his mind—to learn a massive amount of TV script every night and be ready to act by morning.

This is no small task for Terry and the rest of the show's stars. The rule of thumb in TV and movies, he explains, is that one page of script equals about one minute of screen time. But since they are filming one hundred episodes before the year is out, the pace of this half-hour sitcom is accelerated, to about 120 pages a week—the same as a full-length feature film.

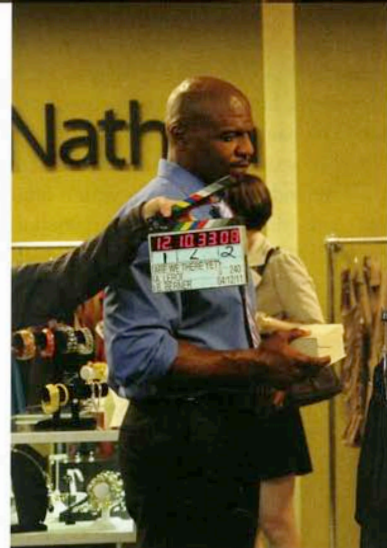
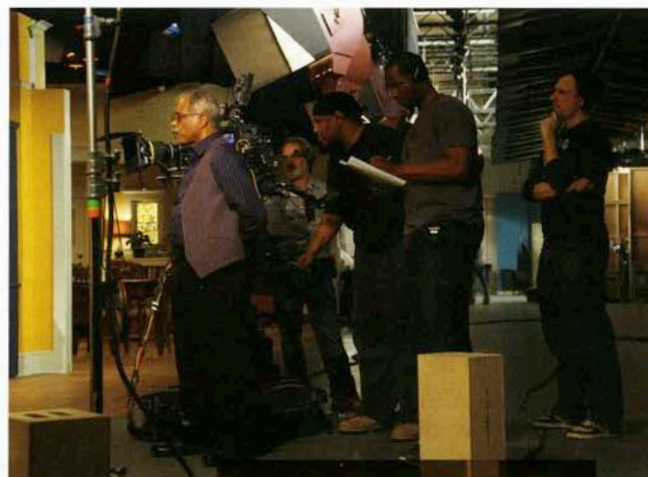
"This has never been done!" Terry almost screams one day. "The way we're doing this is unprecedented!"

A voice artist as well as a comedian, Terry can stretch his voice into a clownish high-pitched squeal or go deep and thundery like a country preacher, all in an instant. As he walks through Stamford these days, people lean out of their cars to hail him. When a Greenwich police officer pulled him over for speeding, the cop took one look and blurted out, "The Old Spice guy!"

Terry talked his way out of that one, and talking his way out of jams is a way of life for his character, Nick Kingston-Persons—a newlywed and new stepfather in a blended family—on this show with the staggering shooting schedule. Bounding his way through the studios, Terry laughs, "We're doing five or six years of television in one year!"

Everything is designed for fast action at the Connecticut Film Center studio on Stillwater Avenue. It was once a storage facility for office equipment, but the CFC

below: The crew prepares one set while the cast shoots on another. right: Director Ted Lange, Director of photography Bill Berner, Executive Producer Ali LeRoi, Writer Owen Smith and Production Supervisor Stan Charnin



And ... action! Terry Crews begins his day at 4 a.m. and memorizes about thirty pages of script a day.

kids and you wonder, What happened?"

"I had that experience on *Everybody Hates Chris*," Terry chimes in. "The kids grew up fast. Over four years our little kid was a grown man. By the time we were done, he was like—"Crews's voice drops to a low rumble—"Hey, pop, whassup?" The two dissolve in easy hysterics.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The boss wizard overseeing this production is the show-business impresario known to all as Ice Cube. His life's journey is rather magnificent. Born O'Shea Jackson in 1969, he grew up in South Los Angeles. As a teenager he rocketed to fame as part of the incendiary rap group N.W.A. (short for Niggaz with Attitude), a hip-hop group widely considered a pioneer of gangsta rap.

But it wasn't all gangsta nation. "He grew up and became a man with a family," says Matt Alvarez, his production partner. Married to Kimberly Woodruff for more than twenty years now, Ice Cube became Mr. Jackson, daddy to four kids. Alvarez, seated in his office in the CFC facility, was there to ease the transition. "He started out doing R-rated movies like *Boyz n the Hood*, and then the *Barbershop* movies, which were PG-13, showed a little different side to what people had seen from him. And that was accepted and the movies did very well. So we said, Let's take it further, to PG."

In other words, Ice Cube wanted to make movies that his kids could see. Thus he evolved into a wisdom-dispensing patriarch of the Bill Cosby school and starred in the 2005 film *Are We There Yet?*, on which the TBS adaptation is based. For the TV version, Ice Cube turned the starring role over to Terry, but he comes to town regularly for his recurring role as Suzanne's protective brother, a part that leaves him plenty of time for touring and for preparing to direct an upcoming Disney movie.

"I wanted to explore the idea of a blended family—a mother and two kids trying to start over with a man who goes

from being a bachelor to being a father and husband," says Ice Cube. "[Blended families are] part of America's fabric but are not explored in a comical way."

When Ice Cube comes to town he's all business in front of and behind the camera, but he was glad to call from the West Coast to talk about the show.

"It's a producer's dream to be working on something every single day without a lot of waiting around. In the movies business, you get all your ducks in a row ... and then wait for whatever may come. On a sitcom, it's constant motion and moving parts. You're definitely in the trenches and trying to be good. You got to be fast and good."

The growing Ice Cube empire mirrors the development of the Tyler Perry franchise. Perry's drive to tell stories about the African-American experience includes taking ownership of the production. "We have a loose connection, but Tyler has his own studio and we're paying monthly rent," says Alvarez, a former New Line executive. "He can say, 'I'm going to shut down the studio for three months and focus on scripts.' We don't have that luxury."

Still, by shooting a hundred shows in thirteen months, the Alvarez team has done away with a lot, including contract renegotiations at the end of every season and busybody notes from anxious studio execs questioning every page of the script. "Everybody has to be part of the team," Alvarez notes. "I knew Terry well because we've made movies, and I know his mentality. He's a hard worker."

When the time came to choose a location, Los Angeles was ruled out. "Then it was Vancouver, Atlanta or here. Ultimately, we chose here because we wanted access to New York crews and the New York actor base. And there are so many people in this region who are familiar with the multicamera format."

Another factor that made this area a lock was Connecticut's nice tax break for film production. There has been some discussion in Hartford about the pro-

priety of this break, but the results have been telling. CFC furnishes services for film crews, which seem to be bustling through the state all the time and filling up area hotels. And CFC maintains another Stamford studio, where the latest season of the Laura Linney series *The Big C* recently wrapped, and a soundstage in Norwalk. The former Clairol factory in Stamford will soon be the site of two CFC-managed soundstages as well as a sports facility run by Chelsea Piers.

The producers of *Are We There Yet?* are currently working with TBS to expand beyond the 100-episode order, and possibly to develop another sitcom. "If that takes off, we can roll into it and never leave," Ice Cube says. "Stamford has been very good to us. To me, there's no reason to leave at all."

Talk of new shows here is a delight not just for film-crew freelancers but for the blue-collar services industry as well. "When we repurpose a building," notes CFC partner Bruce Heller, "we spend up to \$1.5 million. We've spent a half million on the electricians alone."

The film people feel so confident about what they bring to the area that when Governor Dan Malloy recently dropped by the set on a fact-finding mission, he was greeted by Terry Crews, who yelled across the set, "Hey, Gov! Get over here!"

THE LOCAL VIBE

Stamford is a long way from Beverly Hills, but Essence Atkins loves it here. "We live in Trump Parc, which is exactly one-point-oh miles from the studio."

Unlike Terry Crews, who had a big, sprawling family to move, Essence relocated with her husband, former college football star Jaime Mendez, who now works in merchant services. "My husband just made an incredible sacrifice and started his own company, because, he said, 'I don't want to be away from you.'"

It helped that Mendez had tasted athletic stardom. "He gets it!" Essence says excitedly. "Earlier I had dated people in the business and there was this weird,

underlying competitiveness. But being an athlete, he gets the attention."

Terry's wife, Rebecca, always knew what it takes to be an athlete's wife: she was raising five kids as he bounced among four NFL teams. "We've been married twenty-two years," Terry says. "Now we live in Greenwich and I made sure we had a really nice place. We saw Diana Ross the other day!" He puts on a high, squeaky voice. "Oooh there she is!"

"The East Coast and the West Coast have a totally different vibe. It's cool to have people in the grocery store tell you they really enjoy the show. In L.A. it's like, 'I should be on that show.'"

Essence rocks with laughter. "The grocery store clerk in L.A. will be looking at you sideways and sizing you up!"

"What did you do to get that job?" Terry continues. "But over here, people understand the hard-work ethic. On the West Coast, it's 'Hey, who do ya know?'" After a pause, he adds: "I'm definitely getting a place here."

With kids between six and twenty-four, there will be much talk about where to live. In the meantime, he says, the Crews crew is enjoying the local sights.

"It's a great community," adds Essence. "One of the reasons I wanted to stay in downtown Stamford is that it's a great place for walking. I have to go to Barcelona at least once a week. Remo's Pizza is really dee-lish. Napa, Morton's, Capital Grille. And hey, if I get bored, I can go by Jerry Springer's studio."

But Springer is not her boss. That would be Ice Cube. After she talked at some length about Cube's genius for constant metamorphosis, I asked Essence what she would like to ask him. She dropped her head solemnly and in a hush, said: "How do I get another job?" She and Terry threw back their heads and giggled knowingly at the question. *Are We There Yet?* tapes through November. But there's hope that TBS will extend the show to more seasons, and if that happens, they all know just how to get the job done. **E**

hollowed out and soundproofed it, put in new floors, and hung a gridwork of lights from the ceiling. The fifty-yard, U-shaped length of the studio is lined with sets so the crew can move from the bedroom set to the office set in minutes. With no live audience, they just keep on shooting.

After one recent day's shoot with director Ted Lange (who played Isaac the bartender on *The Love Boat*), Terry retired to a small room and sat down on an old gray sofa, where he was joined by Essence Atkins, who plays his wife, Suzanne Kingston-Persons, mother of Lindsey and Kevin. The two beautiful actors felt comfortable laughing together about their new lives as memorization machines.

"It's immensely sacrificial," says Essence with a musical twist, "because we're here thirteen hours and go home where—unlike most of the people besides the writers—we're still working because we have to learn the material for the next

day. If I understand the lines, I can memorize three pages in about three minutes."

"Oh, man," Terry responds. "I write down all my lines and put [them] into a recorder. I wake up at four in the morning and go over all my stuff while I'm working out. To be honest, a four-day week feels like one day because I get about five hours sleep."

Essence looks at him: "I remember one day I looked at the call sheet and it was one of our longest days. Literally thirty-nine pages. And I was in thirty-eight of them! At the end of the day, you're astonished at what you're able to do."

One interesting outcome of the TBS show's intense schedule is that the children will still look about the same age after seven seasons. "It's the opposite of what they face in traditional television," Essence says, "where they do twenty-two episodes and then take five months off. The little kids become big