

An invite to his 'Christmas' party

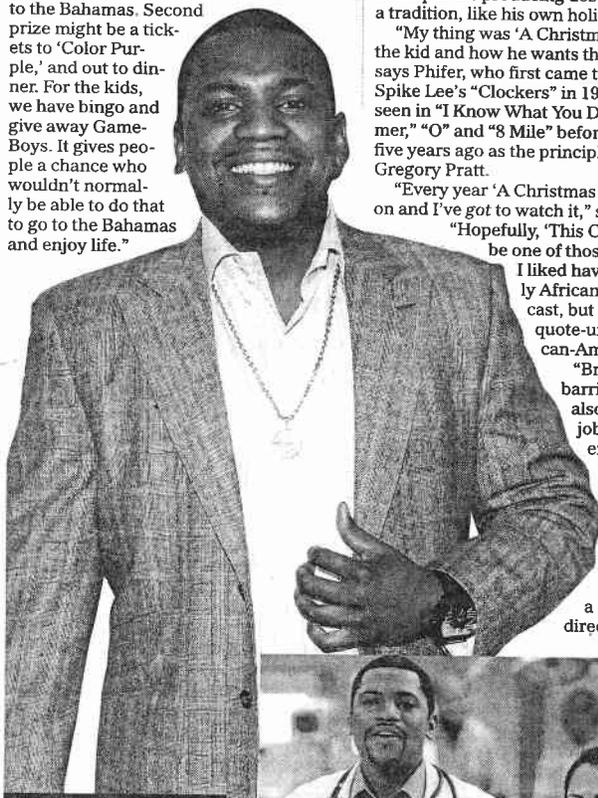
Mekhi Phifer of 'ER' produces a holiday film **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

If you're around this holiday season, you might want to join "ER" actor Mekhi Phifer and his family for their annual get-together.

"I always go back to New York for the holidays," says Phifer, who was born and raised in Harlem but lives in L.A., where he tapes his leading role on the longtime NBC hit. "My family and I have a huge Christmas party, which is always fun. We give gifts, we have a poker tournament, we sing Christmas carols and we eat. We have 70 or 80 people there, with the family and friends of family.

Phifer knows his poker: He beat out Neil Patrick Harris to win a recent "Celebrity Poker Showdown" tournament. But he doesn't play the card shark with his family, which just expanded with the birth of a son for Phifer and his fiancée.

"I [only] sponsor the poker tournament," says the 32-year-old. "Last year the grand prize was two tickets to the Bahamas. Second prize might be a ticket to 'Color Purple,' and out to dinner. For the kids, we have bingo and give away Game-Boys. It gives people a chance who wouldn't normally be able to do that to go to the Bahamas and enjoy life."



Mekhi Phifer is the producer and star of "This Christmas," which he hopes will become a seasonal favorite. Phifer on TV's "ER" (right), with Parminder Nagra.

The Phifers get together from all over the country for the holidays — and if Mekhi has his way, one event other families around the country might do is head to the movies for "This Christmas," a light drama he executive-produced about a holiday get-together starring Delroy Lindo, Regina King, Loretta Devine, Idris Elba ("The Wire") and Phifer in a small role as a firefighter wooing one of the women of the Whitfield family. It opens Wednesday.

Added pop comes from R&B phenomenon Chris Brown, who stars as the youngest Whitfield, Michael, who harbors a secret dream to be a singer. (Needless to say, Brown gets up on talent night at a local bar and nails Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness.") "He was obvious [casting]," says Phifer. "He was just perfect for it." In the film, siblings bicker and make up, cheating spouses are exposed, secrets spill out and even Santa stops by. And Phifer hopes his producing debut will become a tradition, like his own holiday fave.

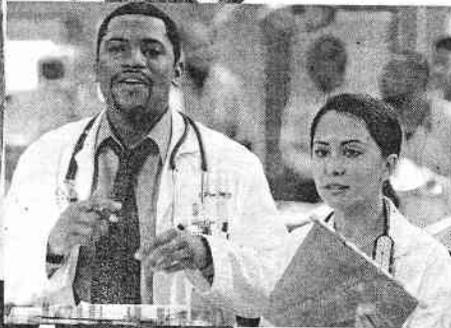
"My thing was 'A Christmas Story,' with the kid and how he wants the BB gun," says Phifer, who first came to attention in Spike Lee's "Clockers" in 1995 and was seen in "I Know What You Did Last Summer," "O" and "8 Mile" before joining "ER" five years ago as the principled, driven Dr. Gregory Pratt.

"Every year 'A Christmas Story' comes on and I've got to watch it," says Phifer.

"Hopefully, 'This Christmas' will be one of those mainstays.

I liked having a mainly African-American cast, but not making a quote-unquote African-American film.

"Breaking down barriers — that's also a part of my job as a producer. To make interesting stories, change people's mind-sets, or at least point them in a more positive direction." ♦



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