

Hollywood's racism factory

I know, some will think I am shoveling some of that outdated black pride, race integrity stuff when I note that black people have given into the Hollywood racism factory.

Think back: Frederick Douglass took his freedom from his slave master, Sojourner Truth asked, "Ain't I a woman," Malcolm X posited freedom "by any means necessary" and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, "We shall overcome."



RON WALTERS

Hollywood has been a different story. That's why I was proud of Sidney Poitier, Will Smith and Denzel Washington who reportedly went to Terrence Howard to ask him not to get on stage at the Academy Awards singing about a pimp, his hit song from the movie, "Hustle and Flow."

They invoked the long struggle in Hollywood and New York, all too often missing now, to instill a sense of integrity to the image of black people into cultural presentations in the arts. When this issue was raised before, the comeback from black actors has been that so few roles are available that they have to take them and make the best of a bad situation. And there has been an attempt to rehabilitate the traitor in the actor (see the new book on Lincoln Perry who played the role of Stepin Fetchit for example) to make him a closet revolutionary reality?

There are still apologists for actors who take racially demeaning roles. Watching the documentary produced by Harvard professor Skip Gates on racism in Hollywood the other day was a revelation. When he interviewed Sam Jackson, the black actor seemed agitated by the fact that the NAACP often raised the issue of racism in Hollywood by criticizing the paucity of roles and the demeaning nature of the roles offered to black actors.

Jackson's thing was that this is the structure of the movie industry and that the NAACP should "just leave us alone and let us do our thing." Jackson, now part of the star system that promoted him to an action hero is able to say that because he has a wide selection of roles. But what if we took that position all along and adjusted it to racism?

Yet, the Gates documentary was also fascinating in portraying how race was configured in Hollywood, by interviewing a producer who talked about the formula used to construct roles. In it, black actors accounted for little unless they were the Denzel Washingtons or Sam Jacksons of the world, actors that can command a foreign audience, a key factor in determining the box office gross. The formula is really tilted toward the supremacy of white males, who get all the women under all circumstances - black males make tentative sexual partners, often appear alone, distorting the image of black male-female relationships.

The bottom line here is that since the positioning of racial images is about money, Hollywood thinks it must play to the racial stereotypes, making it the most powerful purveyor of global racism that exists. It educates and reinforces the demeaning racial role that is in the heads of both Americans and foreigners, through the economic power to commercialize these images through the distribution network of movies and advertising outlets. We should put more of a spotlight on the producers and financiers of these movies who keep alive the negative images of black people before the world.

But that is hard to do if black people themselves buy into the system. I think there is a sickness, a manifestation of the destruction of our image during slavery that makes black actors accept the roles in the first place, then for everyone else to justify it afterward. The sad thing is that they are probably right, that is one black actor refused a demeaning role, another, hungry to make under any circumstances would take.

The actors are not all to blame, for a dependable segment of the cash that producers and financiers count on is the support of the black public, especially the young blacks. I was barely born when "Hi-Hat" Hattie McDaniel, born in my home town of Wichita, Kansas, was the first black Academy Award winner in February of 1940, but her role as Mammy in "Gone With The Wind" did not make all the hometown folks proud and the debate her having accepted demeaning roles reverberated long past my adulthood. That is why, came to know about the life of my favorite singer, Billy Eckstine, I was exceedingly proud to discover that one of the reasons his career did not blossom in Hollywood is that he wouldn't accept demeaning roles.

That racial integrity thing has always pitted black artists against those who financed their production, and the pain is that they could count on our support. When will we break the chain of this form of oppression?

We need more collective action by blacks in Hollywood, not only to reject demeaning roles, but to produce, finance and distribute positive images of black people and black moviegoers, not to support negative images. Maybe then the Academy will have alternatives to awarding Halle Berry as a slut, Denzel as a corrupt cop and Terrence as a pimp.

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Hollywood finally getting with the times - and us

Well, this just about proves it-hip hop has completely taken over the world. In case you missed it or somehow haven't heard, hard core Memphis rap group Three 6 Mafia picked up an Academy Award for best original song, a catchy little ditty titled "It's Hard Out Here For A Pimp" from the motion picture Hustle and Flow.



ANGELA LINDSAY

As one of the two people who probably even watched the Oscars a couple of weeks ago, I had to do a double take at my TV screen to make sure I heard correctly. Judging by the reactions of those in the crowd as the camera panned the room-a series of facial expressions ranging from fellow category nominee Dolly Parton's delight to blank-faced bewilderment, I wasn't the only one who had raised eyebrows.

After making history as the first rap group to perform at the Oscars, the elated trio bounced back out onto stage to pick up their award from, appropriately, multi-talented rapper/actress Queen Latifah, who was an Academy Award nominee in 2003 for her role as "Mama" Morton in the film version of the musical "Chicago."

In addition to Three 6 Mafia's win and performance, the critically acclaimed movie Crash shocked everyone as well when it won the Oscar for best movie, beating out favored homosexual cowboy flick "Brokeback Mountain." "Crash" boldly dealt with the issues of racial prejudice and its unfortunate consequences and featured some of Hollywood's top black talent, including Don Cheadle ("Hotel Rwanda"), Terrence Howard ("Hustle and Flow," "The Best Man"), and Loretta Devine ("Waiting to Exhale," "Desperate Housewives").

Hollywood has often been criticized for being out of touch with reality and, particularly, for its treatment of black talent. Predictable storylines, the routine selection of the same or only certain types of black actors, and, perhaps most poignantly, the fact that very few black actors, though immensely talented and well-deserving, have received the gold statue have all plagued the Academy's illustrious 78-year history. Only within the past few years has that door slowly creaked open with actors such as Jamie Foxx ("Ray"), Denzel Washington ("Training Day") and Halle Berry ("Monster's Ball") taking home the coveted best actor/actress honors.

But does this year's Oscar results really mean that Hollywood is changing or were the awards a matter of Tinseltown trying to be hip or appear in touch with the rest of society? The answer depends on whom you ask. Actor George Clooney, who won best supporting actor for his work in "Syriana," said during his acceptance speech that he was proud to be a part of an Academy that dealt with topics such as AIDS and civil rights when they were unpopular and that the Academy gave black actress Hattie McDaniel an Oscar back in 1939 (for her role in "Gone With the Wind") when blacks were still sitting in the back of theaters.

Now, any person finding themselves in either of the categories the well-intentioned Mr. Clooney mentioned will probably argue that Hollywood has consistently lagged behind when choosing to deal with such touchy topics. Production companies, for instance, avoided "Crash" like the plague before it finally found its way to the big screen after seven years. The more likely scenario saw Hollywood churning out black movies that were more ridiculous than redeeming, more silly than substantive. Even the critically acclaimed "Hustle and Flow" was not immune from its share of critics who shunned the movie for portraying black women as prostitutes. But there was a difference.

"Hustle and Flow" did not randomly cast black women as prostitutes simply for the sake of doing so or to generate laughs from the audience. (It should be noted that a white woman played the part of the main prostitute in the movie.) Rather, it was a redemptive tale of the real life struggles of and the overcoming of odds to achieve a dream by the main character, a small time pimp superbly portrayed by Terrence Howard.

The indelibly humanistic qualities and ambition he displayed were those to which anyone could relate-it just so happens that his lifestyle and the lifestyle of the black women around him are not commendable by society. But the plot was still reflective of the way some people in this country live regardless, the movie was based upon the same "pull-for-the-little-guy" premise that has been repeated over and over in other great Hollywood movies, and it was good to see it recognized as such.

Whether Hollywood is truly turning over a new leaf or not, with all the landmark recognition that blacks have seemingly begun to receive in the movie industry, the hope is that this trend will prompt the demand for quality black entertainment as well as the continued acknowledgment of deserving black talent. And who knows what could be next? Perhaps an Oscar for best director? Spike Lee, anyone? I guess we'll just have to wait and see.

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Blacks must reach out to Justice Kennedy

By Gary L. Bledsoe

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The African-American community may be in for some very difficult times in the years to come as a result of the Samuel Alito confirmation.

We know that it doesn't matter what our issue is, we will start a case with four judges solidly against us. In the past, there were 3.75 because Justice Anthony Kennedy almost always went with the conservative coalition of Clarence Thomas, Antonin Scalia and William Rehnquist—but he did not always. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, a true conservative in her own right, went with them most of the time but not as much as Justice Kennedy.

Now with Alito's confirmation, our only hope is Justice Kennedy. Those of us in the civil rights community must reach out to him as much as possible since he does seem to not be an automatic vote. Make no mistake about it, he is a solid conservative but because the others are so rigidly conservative, a person who might disagree with them five times out of 100 is now considered to be a moderate. Of course, that is not what I thought moderate was in the 70s when I was in law school. Today, there is a different meaning because of the politicization of the court system.

Harriet Miers would have been a conservative but fair judge, and it is possible that former Texas Supreme Court Justice Alberto Gonzales would have been as well, though he has never been thoroughly examined. Judge Alito, on the other hand, has expressed reservations about the one-man, one-vote principle that, along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, has led to the level of minority participation in politics today.

He repeatedly voted against African-American litigants in employment discrimination cases and in favor of white litigants in so-called reverse discrimination cases. Justice Alito has even defended prosecutors who have systematically eliminated African-Americans from juries.

During the arguments regarding Texas congressional redistricting plan the other day, it was patently apparent how the justices are now stacked out. Justice Kennedy, however, at least wanted answers to important questions regarding minority voting rights. Five justices expressed concern over the districts complained of by MALDEF and LULAC and/or the Texas NAACP.

However, all five of those who expressed concern must vote to disapprove the Texas Congressional plan before justice on any level can be achieved. This is a 100 percent vote out of those who did not have their minds made up from the beginning of the case. To put this in perspective, this is like running for political office and starting out with 49 percent of the voters already having cast votes against you. Of course, this means you will have to get all of the remaining votes, not too small a task.

The confirmation of Judge Alito will serve to put African-Americans back to the days of the pre-Warren court. An all out assault on minority rights is not just possible, it is likely.

I saw a senator supporting Alito's confirmation on one of the weekend talk shows and he said that Alito needed to be confirmed because he was a judge who would execute the will of the majority. This is a frightening thought because we have a representative Republican form of government and not a pure democracy.

The late Justice Hugo Jackson once said that we don't have a pure democracy in this country because the majority would run roughshod over the minority. That is so true today, and something we must take note of as the judiciary is being made into a rubber stamp of those currently in power.

We must monitor how the Voting Rights Act is applied to the Texas redistricting efforts. We hope that they will not be severely undermined by the opinion that is forthcoming in the Texas case but we have reason to worry. Hopefully, all of us will invite Justice Kennedy to our activities and reach out to him. Without O'Connor, it might become increasingly difficult for him to simply be a conservative who puts his country first as opposed to one who is simply an extension of those in power from the executive and legislative branches of the federal government.

I surely hope I am wrong and that Roberts or Alito decline to act in accordance with their record and their confirmation process, but early indications are that they will be solid votes against minority issues.

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