

African-American Female Leadership in the Film & Television Industries

Introduction

In a society in which many feel that women of color are the recipients of double discrimination—against their sex and against their race—it is important to note the role models in their professions, those who lead the battle against discrimination by fighting for dignity in their own careers and by assisting aspiring young women in their fields. The entertainment industry—television and cinema are the focus here—has been no stranger to discrimination, most noticeably through roles offered or not offered. This is an examination of some performers in television and film, and of some producers of television and film images.

Performers and Performances

Any reading about people of color in early film history will reveal tremendous discrimination in the types of roles offered. African-American men were offered roles characterized by buffoonery or brutishness, while African-American women were offered only roles of sexual playmates or of maids. This trend was so prevalent that it consumed nearly every role in every film until relatively recently. Not until the 1960s did actors¹ like Cicely Tyson begin to break through this glass wall, and it

¹ I use the term “actor” for both males and females who act. Rosalie Maggio (*The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, 2) explains: “Many women today choose to call themselves actors, pointing out that they are, after all, members of the Actors’ Guild. The word ‘actor’ was used for both sexes for about seventy-five years before the general use of the word ‘actress,’ which is now commonly defined as ‘a woman who is an actor.’ The specification of gender here thus seems unnecessary and supports the male-as-norm system (‘actor’ being the standard and ‘actress’ being the deviation). However, of all the words ending in ‘-ess’ or ‘-ette,’ this is one of the least offensive today (although it will undoubtedly become more unacceptable), and if you use it out of respect for a woman who prefers to call herself an actress, you are probably not sinning grievously.”

was not until the 1970s that the American public began to really be aware of racial typecasting as a problem. Part of the awareness-enriching process began when Cicely Tyson, Ruby Dee, and several others issued a statement in the early 1970s which pointed out that the traditional portrayals of maids and prostitutes were not realistic renditions of African-American life or, for that matter, anyone's life in America (Nestey, 1982).

Before the big changes came along in recent decades, smaller changes were being made by early actors. These changes were not always tangible, or always even felt by anyone except, perhaps, the actors themselves. But the process of recognizing a problem and standing up for one's own dignity and rights is the first step, and therefore a very important one, in effecting change for the future.

Fredi Washington was one of the first young actors to take a stand as an African-American woman. She made a decision in the 1930s not to take any more roles which were demeaning to her race, and stuck by this decision throughout her remaining career: "She said she never would perpetuate outrageous stereotypes just to sustain the illusions of some 'poor white trash--rich white trash too.'" (Null, 1990)

Josephine Baker was another early visionary who declined any roles that painted a racist picture. She established herself during her early teens as a singer and dancer on the stage, and enjoyed a good professional reputation overseas. She was politically active as well, working in an underground resistance movement in France until she left to continue the fight in North Africa. Baker maintained her stance against racism in the United States tours she did after the war as well, declining potentially lucrative offers from segregated "whites-only" clubs: "I have been told that Negroes cannot go to nightclubs in Miami. I cannot work where my people cannot go. It's as simple as that." ...Josephine Baker, with a non-discrimination clause in her contract, is credited with breaking the color bar for audiences in Miami." Firm actions such as these were effective in forcing change on the part of the club-owners; the Miami nightclub she declined changed its policy, and its peers followed suit shortly thereafter (Hughes & Meltzer, 1967).

Many actors were not as successful as Josephine Baker in maintaining a financially successful performing career after taking an anti-racist stance. In the mid-1940s, Butterfly McQueen said she would no longer play the roles into which she had been typecast: scatterbrained, superstitious slaves and servants. She was never offered any other parts until a producer offered her another maid role many years later; she declined still (Null, 1990).

Lena Home was among those who were able to refuse racist parts and survive financially as performers, though "unfortunately, the courageous behavior of those actors and actresses who did take a stand did little to stem the tide of insulting but financially profitable films" for other actors (Null, 1990).

Home may have enjoyed some of her early success by virtue of her light skin color and beauty, as did many actors before her, in that the attentions of powerful producers could be drawn towards her in a non-stereotyping manner. Because she, to them, looked perhaps more like their own wives and daughters, they would not typecast her into maid roles, and because of her young dignity she refused to play the part of the prostitute. She also did not partake in the union for performers and technical crews for African-Americans, which sometimes infuriated those who did, as it undermined the network through which most African-Americans got jobs in the industry at the time: these union members “claimed that she was ruining the chances of other black actresses” (Null, 1990).

In reality, however, Home is a very socially conscious performer. While working under the auspices of the USO, Home not only refused to perform at Camp Robertson, Arkansas, when she learned that the African-American soldiers were going to have to hear her from behind the German prisoners-of-war; she also drove immediately to the offices of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and, with Daisy Bates, drafted a statement of protest. She ended up banned from the USO for all intents and purposes, but incurred her own expenses visiting African-American army bases nonetheless (Buckley, 1986).

As Home gained publicity, she made sure to speak up for her anti-racist work. The first African-American woman to appear on the cover of *Motion Picture* magazine, in October, 1944, she spoke in her interview with Sidney Skolsky about her frustrations with discrimination against African-Americans in the film business. Skolsky went on to write about Home: “Her great ambition is to use her talent and her success to win respect for her people.... Lena has great admiration for Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. Her great desire is to continue their good work for the colored people. She has.” In another Hollywood magazine, the author wrote, “Lena is a forthright and intelligent champion of her people. She is proud of the strides they have made so far, and constantly stumps for greater educational opportunity for them. Only through education can their hopes for a better heritage for their children and their children’s children be realized, she firmly believes. That better heritage she defines as financial security, economic equality and a cultural background.” (Buckley, 1986)

Another light-skinned actor was Dorothy Dandridge. She may have enjoyed some of the same advantages of the politics of skin and Caucasian definitions of beauty that Lena Home did in her early days. Neither woman, it should be noted, can have succeeded solely on the basis of skin-deep appeal; both had talents which won the public as well. Dandridge’s roles were as carefully chosen as Home’s as well, though sometimes this care ended in different choices than others might have made. While she did play a schoolteacher in the 1953 *Bright Road*, her other roles seem to be characterized by the old prostitute stereotype, most notably Carmen Jones (*Carmen Jones*, 1954) and Bess (*Porgy and Bess*, 1959) (Null, 1990; Kuhn & Radstone, 1990).

Even today, actors of color find themselves having to assert themselves against roles that endanger the dignity of their race. During the 1970s, blaxploitation films began to project what they may have thought broke all stereotypes, but which really just dug up the old ones of African-American men as sexual machines with a penchant for crime and violence and of African-American women as brainless sexual toys, even more surprising given the feminism which characterized the decade.

Cicely Tyson was one actor who found meaningful work scarce during those days. Meaningful roles of any kind--especially meaningful roles which are not token "opposite-the-white-guy" roles like Eddie Murphy to Nick Nolte in *48 Hours* in the 1980s--are still hard to find. Tyson found what roles she could usually in television, in specials and made-for-television movies.

Tyson's work in the community should be noted as well as her film and television careers. She was a cofounder of the Dance Theater of Harlem, board of directors of Urban Gateways, and is a trustee of the Human Family Institute (Cloyd, 1990).

Actor Stella Marrs is the executive director of the Martin Luther King MultiPurpose Center. She also works with women's groups and environmental groups, and her local housing authority. She does research on Native American, African-American, Hispanic and Asian cultures for a publication called *History Not to Be Denied*. She has also done workshops and lectures on race relations, with families as her primary source, along with school districts, prisons, and the community at large (Cloyd, 1990).

Other performers have made positive community impact as well. Pearl Bailey has been involved with the United Nations as well as with the March of Dimes. Etta Moten Bamett has worked extensively with cultural awareness groups including the African American Institute, the African Diaspora International Visitors Center, and the DuSable Museum, and has received four honorary doctorates in recognition of her work. Eliza Virginia Capers is a member of the San Fernando Fair Housing Council, and serves on the board of the Muscular Dystrophy Association (Cloyd, 1990). Mary Parrish has been very involved with the Black Women's Political Caucus, the Coalition of Black Representatives, the Manhattan Women's Political Caucus, and the National Black Representative Council, recognizing that through political representation the wheels can turn against racism and sexism in a democracy.

There are countless other African-American women advancing their race in the community and in their professions. Probably the most widely recognized African-American female face in television today is that of Oprah Winfrey. Her talk show is the backbone of her own production company, Harpo Entertainment Group. Her show frequently focuses on race issues, and her willingness to plunge into some meaty--and meaningful--discourse makes her the most popular face in an ever-

swelling sea of talk-show television hosts. According to *Forbes* magazine, her \$88 million per year makes her the second highest paid entertainer, only behind Bill Cosby (Norment, 1993).

Producers of Media Images

Unlike Winfrey, most producers did not begin as performers. While there are many more men at the top of the entertainment heap, there are some women making progress in film and television (Norment, 1993).

Winifred Hervey-Stallworth, executive producer of "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," echoes the "double discrimination" cry. She and many of her colleagues say that because it is such a white-male dominated industry, the entertainment business can hit newcomers and veterans alike with sexism and racism. She advocates getting a solid education and having clear and realistic goals as the best defense. Her advice, quoted in the March 1993 issue of *Ebony* magazine, which listed her as a woman at the top in the entertainment business, is this: "Be patient and take the time to learn. . . Listen to people who have more experience than you. Remember that Hollywood is not the whole world. And watch your back." Debra Langford, vice president for current programming for Warner Brothers Television, adds the importance of "patience, tenacity and flexibility" (Norment, 1993).

Outside the mainstream of film and television conglomerates, there are women of color who produce films independently, affording them greater artistic creativity and independence from much of the political baggage of the big companies. Some films of female African-American independent filmmakers include *I am Somebody* (Madeline Anderson, 1970), a documentary about hospital workers on strike in Charleston, South Carolina; *Your Children Come **Back** to You* (1979) and *A Diferent Image* (1982), both by Alile Sharon Larkin; *The Cruz Brothers and Mrs. Malloy* (1980) and *Losing Ground* (1982) by Kathleen Collins; *Hair Piece: A Film For Nappy-Headed People* (1981) and *Secret Sounds Screaming: The Sexual Abuse of Children* (1986) by Ayoka Chenaira; and *Illusions* by Julie Dash (Kuhn & Radstone, 1990).

Visible in Ayoka Chenzira's work is her background in dance, and her life as an African-American woman: "*Syvilla* (1975) and *Zajota and the Boogie Spirit* (1989) take dance and the African-American experience as their subjects." Chenzira also made *Hairpiece: A Film For Nappy-Headed People* (1984), an "animated satire on black women's struggles with racist standards of beauty." Of this short film, Annette Kuhn and Susannah Radstone write:

Particularly effective in its use of humor and specific address to black women, Hairpiece is an important work in black cinema. Chenzira's video work confronts the racist and sexist abuse of power, integrating the perspectives of people of color in exploring feminist issues such as sexual abuse. Chenzira is also a media activist and teacher who presents her work widely and lectures on many topics related to African-Americans and the media" (Kuhn & Radstone, 1990).

Another US independent filmmaker is Julie Dash. She deals primarily with image and self-image of African-American women: “*Four Women* (1977) is an experimental dance film presenting four archetypal images of black women set to a ballad sung by Nina Simone; and *Diary of an African Nun* (1976) is an adaptation of a short story by Alice Walker.” But the film for which she is most noted is *Illusions* (1983), which centers around two women in 1940s Hollywood. It involves the same “black-girl-passing-for-white-to-succeed” subplot used by so many directors in past years, but the difference between this film and those is crucial: in those, the young woman trying to shed her racial identity is always foiled by some outside force through which she realizes that her plan will never work, or she completely separates herself from her family and friends of color only to a tragic end. In *Illusions*, it is an internal trigger, seeing her friend compromise herself in a similar fashion that makes her see the evils of a system that would make her do this to herself. Dash is also the producer of the critically acclaimed *Daughters of the Dust* (Kuhn & Radstone, 1990).

Despite the fact that the majority of citizens in our society consider ours to be the most progressive and democratic society on earth, people of color continue to be discriminated against in virtually every sector of American life. Whether the rampant relegation of non-Caucasians to lower socioeconomic strata delimit their upwardly-mobile opportunities, or the color bar of the prospective employer and/or audience determines one to be too dark or too light or “just not the look we need here,” African-Americans are consistently *still* shut out of the dominant white mainstream. This is at least as true in the film and television industries as it is in any other part of American life.

Conclusions

The examples here have been the exception to the rule, the ones who could see the big picture and make some attempt to repaint it—this time in color—or at least what parts their brushes could reach.

In her autobiography, Dorothy Dandridge wrote,

In the last analysis what this society denied me was what it denies most women of color, perhaps all: simple respectability. If my story means anything, it means that the white millions still have to grant that simple and costly right to black women. Negro women remain the last to be counted in our country. Our rights in sex and marriage and law are before the Supreme Court now in several tests. Time and the practical actions of people will change all this anyway. Human appeal across color and between sexes will always outrun the law (Dandridge & Conrad, 1970).

As young filmmakers and performers continue to take a stand and also to take active roles in their communities, they educate everyone. The choices they make and the influence they have on young, impressionable minds will determine the advancement of people of color to a position of real and total equality with other

racial and ethnic groups in our society. The imperative is clear: if these choices are made carelessly or shallowly, the future of African-Americans as they perceive themselves and as others perceive them may put them in danger of continuing to be oppressed for many more decades to come.

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