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Hollywood and Its Not-So-Great White Ways

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IT'S AN ISSUE that's not going to go away.

By now a lot of people are probably tired of the whole thing—all this talk about underrepresentation of minorities in film and television.

They're sick of hearing about funny-sounding groups such as *Nosotros* and *La Raza*, they've had it up to here with this Edward James Olmos guy and this crusade of his, and the very last thing they want to read about now is how the NAACP is threatening to sue and organize boycotts. They're asking, "Why are we listening to these whiners? Why is it even an issue?"

It is an issue because Hollywood and its blatantly discriminatory practices have made it one. No less than six months ago, the news wires were burning up the presses with statistics revealing how paltry the industry employment hiring rates were for minority writers, directors and actors, particularly in proportion to their percentage of the population. Everyone at the studios and networks wrung their hands and did their best to sound contrite.

As they promise after every such informational release, they said they'd work harder to do better. So what did their collective efforts lead to? An even bigger whitewashing of prime-time programming in this season's fall lineup than ever before—there is not a single minority lead from any of the major networks.

This is certainly not just a television thing. Remember the movie "Volcano?" It came out a couple of summers ago. Cost more than \$100 million to make. Cast of thousands. Takes place in the heart of L.A., in the Miracle Mile District. Take a closer look at all those "thousands." For being set in one of the most diverse melting pots in the world, you'd think you were watching a movie set in Salt Lake City. How can something like that possibly be justified in this day and age?

Hollywood argues that this is an economic decision. That there is no market for such diversity. The industry can't risk losing sponsors or angering shareholders. That same lame argument was used about the NBA not long ago. Can't have too many black players on the court at once. White fans won't show up at the games. We'll never be able to get TV sponsors.

Hollywood argues that it's tried to find diversity, but the talent simply isn't there. That's one of its good-as-gold standbys. Am I missing something? Are there Frank Capras, John Fords and Orson Welleses behind the making of today's "Big Daddies" and "Dumb and Dumber" that I'm just not attuned to? Are there Brandos and Oliviers on the screen whose performances I happen to be overlooking?

Why is it even an issue? Take a trip to a Major League Baseball game and try to imagine looking down on the field and seeing nothing but white players. That's the myopic vision of the world that Hollywood has historically been selling.

Imagine going to a record store and not being able to find the music of Louis Armstrong, Seal or Ricky Martin. Imagine going to a bookstore and not being able to find the works of Maya Angelou, Amy Tan or Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Suddenly, because of all the negative publicity their actions have brought on, TV producers and the networks, embarrassed, are making desperate attempts to find minorities to plug into their programming. The question remains, however, whether their efforts at this late stage will amount to anything more than a superficial Band-Aid fix.

Hollywood fancies itself as cutting edge—the world leader in setting trends and being politically correct on such hot-button topics as the Amazon rain forest and Tibet. Yet, in many ways, it's still stuck back in the days when director D.W. Griffith made a thinly veiled Aryan propaganda movie called “Birth of a Nation,” all Westerns had white actors slathered with body paint playing Indians, and someone like Mickey Rooney was fitted with oversized prosthetic teeth to play the part of a Chinese apartment manager.

We've seen the end of apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall and peace efforts at work in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Will we ever see a resolution to the problem of discrimination in the industry?

It is an issue that's not going to go away—until Hollywood faces reality.

[Editor's Note: It wasn't until 2016 that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences scrambled to address a public outcry over a lack of diversity among its membership.]