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### **HOLLYWOOD: THE AFRICAN & ASIAN AMERICAN DILEMMA**

The mere mention of the word racism causes one to mentally tense up, bracing for impact. Upon hearing it we expect controversy to follow. Inarguably, it is a negative aspect of our society, to form opinions based on appearances and stereotypes. It is not to be tolerated in the workplace, government, or society as a whole. Yet, we pay millions of dollars every year to be entertained by racism. We've been so culturally programmed that many people don't even realize its happening. While some improvements have been made, as long as our entertainment is dictated to us by primarily a primarily Caucasian Hollywood, things will be slow to change.

To what am I referring you may be asking yourself. I am talking about the misrepresentation of African Americans and Asians in our mainstream media, specifically the movie industry (Forgive the over-generalization of the word Asian, but supposedly the average American can't tell the difference between us anyways). While extensive volumes have been and could be further composed on the topic, for the sake of brevity I will stick to the context of our current pop-culture. In the past, we have seen both African Americans and Asians being extremely typecast. For blacks, they have been cast as slaves, some sort of superhero, or a basketball playing, gun toting thug. For Asians, we have been pigeonholed as kung-fu sidekicks, Zen masters, or enemies of war.

Yet in recent years, there have been a few exceptions to this rule. Several films depicting African American actors in a more believable light have made it into the

limelight of mainstream theater. Such examples include, but are not limited to, *Remember the Titans*, *Finding Forrester*, and *Save the Last Dance*. While it could be argued that Spike Lee is the true voice of the African American public, Blockbuster rarely promotes such movies as *Bamboozled* or *American History X*. So, I will describe how the majority of moviegoers have been seeing both minorities.

Released in 2000 and marketed as a family “feel good” movie, *Remember the Titans* shows the struggle of forced integration in public schools during the early 1970’s. It pits Denzel Washington against Will Patton as two football coaches who are forced to cooperate in order to bring together a football team torn along the line of racial diversity. At first, neither likes the other, and this sentiment is well represented amongst the players as well. It isn’t until they get over their differences and bury their hate that things really start to turn around for their team. Through cooperation and cohesiveness, they emerge triumphant, showing that soul and spirit are more important than the color of one’s skin. While it has been criticized for glossing over racial issues and for being overly idealistic, it is a strong film from the standpoint that Washington and Patton exemplify what Martin Luther King Jr. had dreamed, that we could peacefully coexist without prejudice.

In the 2000 release *Finding Forrester*, Sean Connery plays a reclusive old man who lives in an apartment overlooking a local basketball court. He is an accomplished author who seems to be hiding from society’s expectations of him, namely to write another novel as groundbreaking and gripping as the one that made him famous. A newcomer to the silver screen, Robert Brown, plays a young high school basketball talent whose writing catches the eye of the elderly novelist in a botched attempt to break into his apartment. While this typifies the Hollywood perception of young black men in that

he's a basketball player and nonchalantly breaks and enters into apartments, thankfully it doesn't stop there. The character development is superb, as we see both Connery and Brown growing closer and learning from each other. It becomes more about the friendship and less about race or age as the film goes on. It also contains a somewhat social taboo, as Brown's character begins to fall in love with a white girl played by Anna Paquin.

This brings me to the next film I've chosen to speak on. *Save the Last Dance* (2001) doesn't just have an interracial romance as a side-note. Rather, it is the focal point of the entire movie. Julia Stiles and Sean Patrick Thomas play an unlikely pair who are thrown together by circumstance. In the movie, Stiles loses her mother in a tragic car accident, and moves to Chicago to live with her father. It's here that she meets Thomas who helps to rekindle her love for ballet. It's during this time that the two realize that they're becoming a couple only to find that there's resentment from friends and family over their decision. In the end, they remain together and it has a sweet storybook "happy ever after" feel to it. The message of this movie is the only person you have to be is yourself. While the character of Thomas is consistent with societal stereotypes, it does develop his personality and show a softer side, not often revealed in such movies.

While we still see some stereotypes of African Americans being played out in the movies, there are progressive steps being made in the right direction. I believe that this can be attributed to the general consensus amongst African Americans that they're tired of being typecast, and are ready to be portrayed in a more lifelike manner. I mentioned previously Spike Lee, and his often controversial films. While not always gaining large

approval from “white” America, he has helped immensely to open the eyes of the film industry that there is more to accomplish than what has been done in the past.

This being said, humor me for a moment and try think of an American made film depicting Asians in “real life” situations. I tried this myself, and was hard pressed to come up with an answer. In fact, the two biggest Asian stars I could think of come from the exact same genre, Action/Fighting. Jackie Chan and Jet Li are both kung-fu fighting martial arts masters. Each of their last two films has revolved around high-flying kicks and hand-to-hand combat. While each had a different location or time era associated with it, the message to the general public was the same. All Asian people are good for in the entertainment industry is their acrobatic antics and ability to inflict pain. Yet, there is an awareness and a push towards something different. Yen Le Espiritu says in her writing *Resistance and Social Change*, “Asian American[s] simply do not accept the exotic, one-dimensional caricatures of themselves in U.S. mass media.” In order better understand what she means, evaluate some of the recent Jackie Chan and Jet Li movies that have been released as of late.

In Jackie Chan’s year 2000 film, *Shanghai Noon* is set in the old west, during the construction of the railroads (go figure). In this movie he plays the sidekick to the cowboy character of Owen Wilson. Together, they set out on an adventure to rescue the kidnapped Princess Pei Pei from the clutches of, you guessed it, an Asian bad guy Roger Yuan. Amazingly, the plot of the entire movie can be summed up with those few sentences. The rest of the film is filled with death-defying stunts and wild fight scenes.

Another example of the whole sidekick mentality at work is the 2001 film *Rush Hour 2*. In this Jackie Chan adventure, he is cast alongside Chris Tucker. The series has

been marketed as “The Fastest Hands in the East meet the Fastest Mouth in the West.” This brings to my mind the question of whether or not Hollywood considers what Asians have to say important, or if the kicks and punches will suffice. The storyline here is that the dynamic duo of Chan and Tucker must foil the Triads plans to manufacture fake money. Spanning from Hong Kong to Las Vegas, the plot is contrived and seemingly tired out. This is the third such buddy film that Chan has starred in, the first having been the original *Rush Hour* and then *Shanghai Noon*. I personally, am getting tired of seeing it. This one is worse, as Tucker repeatedly cuts down Chan for his small stature and lack of English speaking skills. Due to political correctness, Chan just suffers through it and is unable to retort. Apparently, it’s still okay to make fun of Asians, as long as you’re a minority yourself.

Enough about Jackie, on to Jet Li. While sporting a distinctively different artistic style to his movies, the bottom line to the movie formula is the same; punch, kick, and repeat. One of his latest movies (2001), *Kiss of the Dragon*, screams kung-fu flick to the viewer, even with the title. While almost needless to mention, here goes the plot. There’s a sadistically corrupt French police officer played by actor Tcheky Karyo, who is holding hostage Bridgette Fonda’s daughter. The rest pretty much speaks for itself as Jet Li punches, kicks, and flips his way through the bad guys, using a seemingly endless supply of acupuncture needles along the way. One gratuitous fight scene takes place when Li is in a French police station and accidentally stumbles upon a room full of training black-belts. I seriously doubt that they so diligently follow Asian martial arts in France that they’ve devoted entire police stations to serve as training dojos.

Perhaps more interesting than any of the aforementioned movies is that of Jet Li's 2001 movie *The One*. It's set somewhere in the distant future. According to the story, there are 100+ parallel dimensions coexisting. In each one, there is another version of you. If one is to die, then that person's "energy" is dispersed evenly throughout the remaining survivors. That's where Jet Li comes in. He's a renegade future cop, jumping in and out of these dimensions, killing off all the other versions of him in order to be "the one" remaining, with total power. Unfortunately, the movie never really expands upon this concept, and the audience is left with a lackluster rip-off of the Matrix. With Jet Li's apparent English dialect problems, it's been difficult for him to move into more dramatic roles.

Another bothersome movie that's come out this year was Pearl Harbor. Granted, it illustrated a pivotal point in America's history, but it still contributed to the dehumanization of Asians in the film. The Japanese were shown to be heartless, cold, and calculating. Whether or not this was true of the actual soldiers and pilots of Nippon cannot be truly said. I'm not supporting the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or saying it was right. However, if they really wanted to tell the whole truth, they would've continued the movie through to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which some view as being of equal cruelty.

So, why has Hollywood begun to change its mode of thinking regarding one minority, while leaving others for the most part unchanged? According to Soyon Im of the Seattle Weekly, "Yellow is the new black." She basically says that Hollywood caters its films to the average white citizen, and therefore will always need some sort of scapegoat, comic relief, or exotic character to fascinate them. She said it best:

“To purge our popular media of negative stereotypes or anything else that is potentially offensive would leave our entertainment industries about as exciting as a PTA meeting. But film and television in America are largely a celebration of the average white person, very often of the average white guy (who ends up with a long-legged beauty). Why can't producers trust audiences to see themselves similarly through an Asian character? Why isn't there an Asian member on a show like *Friends*? Why aren't Asian actors ever cast in real, full-on romantic leads? Jet Li, who played a kung-fu knight in shining armor, never even kissed his Juliet in *Romeo Must Die*. Neither did the suave Chow Yun-Fat in *Anna and the King* or the *Replacement Killers*.”

These are my sentiments exactly. We don't necessarily need to overhaul the whole mentality of Hollywood, but we do need to make them aware that there is a market for more than just kung-fu flicks. I think that Asian Americans are so typecast because we lack someone as outspoken and controversial as Spike Lee. If someone were to start making waves in Hollywood in regards to this problem, then we'd start seeing some improvements. Yet, there is little or no incentive to do so. Asians have the martial arts genre nearly completely dominated. There seems to be an unspoken rule regarding movie making. That is, leave the drama and serious acting to everyone else, and have Asian people focus on what they do best.

The problem is, with a closed minded mentality like this, it will be a long time to wait until we see anything actually start to happen. I myself have been guilty of this, cashing out to see whatever the latest fighting movie is, knowing full well that the acting will be sub-par and that the entire movie will be driven not by an intricate plot, but an array of violence. I guess that I myself fit the stereotype of an Asian American. I'm

somewhat knowledgeable about martial arts and just so happen to be good with computers.

So, what do I suggest, without sounding to hypocritical? How can minorities better themselves, or at least make a positive impact? If we want to see the perception of Asians change, or any other minority for that matter, we must vote our pocketbooks. Refuse to go to movies that support an ethnocentric cast or racist viewpoint. Instead, go to see independent films that better represent the Asian American population.

One such venue is [igooTV.com](http://igooTV.com) which is being launched by Seattle filmmaker Jay Koh. Included in its debut are three of his films about Korean Americans. On his reasons for starting this website, Koh says:

“Power brokers of white Hollywood and network TV show only a tiny pinch of what Asian Americans are really like. They obviously only see nerdy techies or kung-fu masters in their circles. I don't want a bunch of middle-aged white guys writing dialogue and stories about an Asian-American girl. I want igooTV shows to be authentic. I want Asian Americans who are bursting to pour their stories onto the screen.”

So there you have it, one of my little pet peeves in a nutshell. Being the son of a Japanese man and Caucasian woman, I have seen both discrimination against my father and reverse discrimination against my mother. I experienced discrimination growing up, especially while living in Montgomery, Alabama. One of my good friends was Puerto Rican, and because his name was José he was often mistaken for being Mexican. By association, I became a “mexi-kid” along with him. This bothered me two-fold. Not only were they being racist, but they were also doing so incorrectly. I'd much rather be called a Jap if I have to endure a racial slur. At least they'd be getting it right. I can't



help but think that it requires a particular breed of inbred stupidity for such behavior (giving away some of my prejudice against rednecks). Such individuals should be rounded up and studied somewhere. People simply didn't know what to make of an Asian American family down there, where most of the population is split 50/50 between whites and blacks. The neighbors used to stare at my dad as they would drive by. It was such an awkward feeling, one I wouldn't wish on anyone.

It is my hope that the United States as a whole will become better educated as to the diversity it contains. Hopefully within the next decade or so we'll see either Hollywood start to reflect that change or, however unlikely, start to pioneer it. Either way, our nation has to raise its awareness level past just using politically correct terms in the mainstream media. We need to end racism in all forms, including entertainment. As long as we're being amused at the expense of misrepresenting another culture's image, none of us are really free from it. Yet, as we become aware of the racism in our own hearts, we can begin to redefine the paradigms which bind us.

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