

# Black and Right

*The NAACP has been a champion of Hollywood since its early days*

By Todd Longwell

**Y**oung children watching President Barack Obama take the Oath of Office last month couldn't possibly have grasped the historical magnitude of the occasion, nor could they understand how the NAACP set the stage for the moment during the previous century. But for African-Americans of previous generations, the significance is crystal clear.

"When I was growing up, the NAACP was the voice of the opposition to discrimination in this country," says Emmy-winning TV director Paris Barclay (HBO's "In Treatment"). "It's one of the most effective organizations because it uses its bully pulpit to pound the doors down. Barack, who won an Image Award four years ago, is someone they championed from the beginning."

Obama's ascendancy to the presidency gives a wonderful poetic gestalt to the organization's celebration of its 100th anniversary, which kicks into high gear tonight with "The 40th NAACP Image Awards," hosted by Halle Berry and Tyler Perry, at Los Angeles' Shrine Auditorium.

Like Obama — the son of a black Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas — the NAACP has a multicultural heritage. Originally dubbed the National Negro Committee, its founding members included such prominent

blacks as W.E.B. Du Bois and Archibald Grimké, along with a large contingent of Caucasians, including journalist/social activist Mary White Ovington; New York Post owner Oswald Garrison Villard; and Henry Moskowitz, who, like many of the group's early leaders, was Jewish. They chose Feb. 12, 1909, as the official date of the organization's formation because it marked the 100th birthday of Abraham Lincoln. The following year, the organization officially changed its name to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

During the early decades of its existence, the NAACP focused on court cases and public awareness campaigns to fight Jim Crow laws legalizing segregation and voter disenfranchisement, and to stop lynching and other violent acts against blacks. Years of tireless efforts by its legal department, led by chief counsel (and future Supreme Court Justice) Thurgood Marshall, culminated in the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which effectively launched the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. But Hollywood was always in its sights.

In 1915, the NAACP staged a nationwide protest against D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation," for its portrayal of black people as savages and the Ku Klux Klan as heroes. As a

result, several major cities — including Chicago, Kansas City, Pittsburgh and St. Louis — blocked the film from opening.

In 1951, the NAACP launched a campaign against the TV series adaptation of the long-running radio program "The Amos 'n Andy Show," complaining that it depicted blacks in a stereotypical manner. The network yielded to the pressure, pulling the still-popular show in 1953.

While the quality of roles has improved greatly in the years since, the quantitative gains have been less impressive. In December, the NAACP Hollywood Bureau released a 40-page report titled "Out of Focus, Out of Sync — Take 4," which demonstrated that, while the entertainment industry has made progress in terms of racial diversity, minorities are still woefully under-represented, particularly on television.

The study notes that while the Big Four networks acquit themselves adequately in the ever-growing field of reality shows, they come up short for scripted programs. Presently, the Big Four have only two series centering on black characters (CBS' "The Unit" and "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation") and there has been a decrease of minorities in recurring roles in recent years. It attributes the shortage in part to the 2006 merger of UPN and the WB Network into the CW network, which led to

NAACP membership drive circa 1945



President Harry Truman addresses the NAACP Convention at the National Mall in Washington on April 19, 1940.

the cancellation of several minority-themed sitcoms.

"It's a very complicated issue," NAACP Hollywood Bureau executive director Vicangelo Bulluck says.

With a black president in the White House, Will Smith a top global boxoffice attraction and Oprah Winfrey the queen of daytime television, is complacency a danger?

"Everybody has those concerns," Bulluck says. "We have to make sure that the availability of opportunity reaches beyond just a few. It's important for organizations like the NAACP to be the watchdog."

Crucial, he says, is getting more blacks and other minorities in the executive ranks with the power to greenlight projects. The NAACP addressed that issue in 2000, when it teamed with coalition partners representing Latino, Asian-American and Native-American groups to lobby each of the four major television networks to sign Memorandums of Understanding in which they committed to making institutional changes in their operations to improve diver-

sity in hiring. They also agreed to hire vps of diversity.

According to the latest "Out of Focus" report, the NAACP plans to execute new Memorandums of Understanding with each network, incorporating the lessons learned since the 2000 agreements. In the meantime, it recommends that people of color pool their resources and acquire or build studios and distribution businesses, as multihyphenate Perry has done with his Tyler Perry Studios in Atlanta.

Producer Stephanie Allain ("Hustle & Flow") says people have gotten the message, even though "the executive ranks haven't changed all that much," she notes. "What changed is people are doing it for themselves. They're no longer waiting for permission to do something."

The NAACP's Hollywood Bureau is doing its part to foster the next generation of entertainment auteurs with a master's degree writing fellowship it established in 2005 at USC in partnership with CBS. For the past five years, it also has held symposiums in Los Angeles in the week preced-

ing the Image Awards, uniting educators and industry heavyweights to explore such areas as marketing and film finance.

But the Image Awards ceremony remains the most important tool for promoting the NAACP's agenda in Hollywood. It was established by the Beverly Hills/Hollywood Branch of the NAACP in 1967 to honor the work of black actors, writers, directors and producers, as well as those in Hollywood who supported their efforts. The ceremonies were first televised nationally as a syndicated special in 1974. In 1987, they moved to NBC. In 1996, the show landed a primetime slot on Fox, where it remains.

Presently, the NAACP hands out Image Awards in 35 categories, along with several honorary awards, including the President's Award and Entertainer of the Year.

Given the under-representation of minorities in certain corners of the media world, one might worry about finding worthy honorees in each category. But Bulluck says that has never been an issue.

"If you look at what's going on in television and the movies and who's up for an Image Award, you think, 'The issue is not a shortage of talent,'" he says. "We have phenomenal talent at this moment in history, and given the support and funding, we could see a real renaissance."

Image Awards chair Clayola Brown says this year's show will pay tribute to both the 100th anniversary of the NAACP and the 40th anniversary of the awards, with clip reels and special guests.

"We'll also be doing some tie-ins with some concerns that President Obama laid out during his campaign," she says, such as the climate crisis, which will be represented by the Chairman's Awards recipients, former Vice President Al Gore and Wangari Muta Maatha, both of whom have won the Nobel Peace Prize.

The NAACP also is marking its 100th anniversary with a collection of "centennial media projects" that kicked off in 2007 with Civil Rights Schools, a series of two-day conferences at universities nationwide that unite leading scholars, historians, social scien-

tists and jurists to explore different periods of the NAACP's history.

Other centennial projects include an upcoming documentary about the organization's history, "Eye of the Storm," and "The NAACP Songbook," a compilation CD of spirituals, patriotic anthems and protest songs from the past 100 years interpreted by some of today's top recording artists.

Bulluck is most excited about the NAACP Top 100 Films of the Century, a list of the most significant movies from 1909-2009 exploring the lives of people of color. Beginning in August, the public will be invited to go online ([www.naacptop100.com](http://www.naacptop100.com)) and rate the films — which range from pioneering black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's 1925 silent film "Body and Soul" to 2006's "Dreamgirls" — from least to most influential.

In compiling the list of films, Bulluck worked with an advisory committee of entertainment industry insiders, filmmakers and representatives from several major universities, including UCLA, NYU, Harvard and Howard.

"For me, one of the greatest insights was that there was a lot of activity going on (with African-American filmmakers) in the silent era," Bulluck says. "I took a lot of film classes, but I don't remember anybody talking about them."

Bulluck says the key to ensuring that the industry keeps producing similarly inspiring and relevant works is solidifying and deepening the NAACP's relationships with the networks and the studios, as well as the talent guilds and the below-the-line unions.

"We understand the impact the industry has on America and on the world, and we want to help the industry understand that responsibility — and also that diversity and inclusion is good business," Bulluck says. "You can't force people. But I'm hoping that the history of the NAACP and the moment will inspire the truly creative people in Hollywood." **THR**

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