

Image Awards Stand Apart

For more than 50 years NAACP has been honoring talent often ignored by other kudosfests • By Rande Dawn



← NAACP president and CEO Derrick Johnson and Karen Boykin-Towns, vice chair, NAACP board of directors, fete nominees at a luncheon.

When the NAACP Image Awards returns on Feb. 25 for its 54th annual ceremony, there'll be plenty of cause for celebration. Not only will artists from television, motion picture, music and literature find themselves feted for their contributions, but it's also the 20th anniversary of the organization's Hollywood bureau — and the first time the show will be fully in front of a live audience since 2020.

But an Image Awards event isn't just another reason to hand out accolades. For organizers and nominees alike, the existence of a show that largely focuses on Black entertainers is an achievement in itself. It exists both within the Hollywood bubble and outside of it, with its own rules and

perspectives and, perhaps most importantly, own voters.

"At its core, the Image Awards are a gesture of advocacy," says Kyle Bowser, senior VP, NAACP Hollywood bureau. "In a simplistic and brilliant way it shifts the authority, or the question of evaluation, out of the hands of those who have been traditionally invested with that power — and asks other people, 'What do you think?' And just by asking them to weigh in from their vantage point, you get different answers."

The crown jewel of any film awards season remains the Academy Awards; other ceremonies, no matter how prestigious or peer-group focused, tend to be seen as predictive or reflective of the Oscars. Yet the Image Awards

stand apart, making their own headlines and frequently honoring those who are left out of the discussion elsewhere: This year, Gina Prince-Bythewood's "The Woman King" garnered nine nominations while being blanked by the Academy; and without much fuss or fanfare, for the first time the entertainer of the year nominees are all women (Angela Bassett, Mary J. Blige, Quinta Brunson, Viola Davis and Zendaya).

Still, for some the Image Awards are interpreted as a reaction to Black talent being unseen elsewhere. That's not entirely wrong, says Scott Mills, BET CEO.

"Some years, general market award shows do a really good job of being inclusive, and some years they don't. Broadly, there's

progress being made about the concepts of inclusion and representation, but the progress is so inconsistent. Having a consistent place where the community can come together with a consistent sense of values and perspective is really important."

This year, the Image Awards will simulcast on BET, CBS and 11 other Viacom properties, including MTV, Comedy Central, TV Land and Logo.

"All of us value the Image Awards in terms of us as a community," says Prince-Bythewood, nominated for directing TV's "Women of the Movement" and "The Woman King" this year, and past recipient of trophies from the organization. "You want acknowledgement from your peers," she continues, "but it feels like critics groups are oftentimes the only ones acknowledging our work."

Actor Cliff "Method Man" Smith, nominated this year for "On the Come Up" and "Power Book II: Ghost," adds: "A show like the Image Awards is very important, because it brings light to where there's usually darkness, and people honestly aren't looking. Remember, the NAACP was doing inclusion before it was trendy. They're the OGs of inclusion."

NAACP organizers have had their eye on the Hollywood ball virtually since inception; one of the organization's first major campaigns after its founding in 1909 was to rally against D.W. Griffith's 1915 feature "Birth of a Nation," which was the first film shown in the White House. The film's popularity led to increased membership in the Ku Klux Klan, even in Midwestern states, says NAACP president and CEO Derrick Johnson.

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“We knew then, as we know now, the impact that entertainment can have on the psyche of individuals and the public policy that governs us all,” says Johnson. “Those who underestimate the impact of entertainment have not paid attention to history and how entertainment has informed culture, politics and the political environment.”

As the group branched out, an office in Los Angeles was critical to serve intersecting areas of importance: advocacy, public policy and entertainment “that can bolster the work we do across the country,” he adds.

The Hollywood bureau, formed in 2003 in response to a lack of Black presence on other award shows, has since spearheaded multiple initiatives, Bowser

points out. It has worked with studios and other industry institutions on DEIA issues, and to create inroads for diverse applicants in creative and below-the-line work in the industry.

Still, the Image Awards, which debuted in 1967, remains the Hollywood bureau's chief responsibility — and in time has evolved to become its own distinct entity. Today, awards are handed out not just in the expected entertainment categories, but also to social-media personalities and podcasts. (A social justice impact award will go this year to civil-rights attorney Benjamin Lloyd Crump.) No other major award that focuses on film and television also honors books.

“The literary arts have not gone away just because electronic media has had such a

boom,” says Bowser, noting that the NAACP has recently made a deal for an imprint with Harper Collins, where some Image Award recipients may end up being published.

One of those literary nominees, Sheree Renée Thomas (co-editor with Oghenechovwe Donald Epeki and Zelda Knight of “Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction”), says singling out a speculative fiction collection is perfectly on point with the Black experience: “We are living in a science fiction world,” she says. “To be Black is to be hyper-visible and invisible at the same time in this society. That's science fiction. And it's an important honor to be recognized by your own community.”

Because the Image Awards are not meant to be merely a reaction to a non-inclusive Hollywood hiring and award system, there's no plan to shutter it if — somehow — parity emerges in other award shows.

“We are often asked a week or two before the show every year, ‘Does this show need to exist?’” says Mills. “This show exists because one, the talented people in our community deeply value being recognized by the community, and two, this community values recognizing talented people.”

Bowser maintains that the Image Awards exist “because it ought to exist. There should be a

place where the folks who don't always get asked are asked what they think. I don't think it will ever run its course.”

Johnson hopes organizers will find bigger platforms for the Image Awards in the future. Thirteen channels may just not be enough, he suggests.

“We are one of the few shows, because of the culturally relevant content, that actually grows in viewership on larger platforms,” he says.

Meanwhile, the Image Awards will continue to provide future inspiration to some of its younger audience members. Smith recalls when he was growing up checking out the show to delight in a room full of people including Phylicia Rashad and Diahann Carroll.

“It has a lot to do with prestige,” the actor says. “A Soul Train Award, a BET Award — we know where that comes from. But the NAACP, those letters alone let you know this isn't a game. These are people who broke down barriers to make it easier for the generations that came after them to sit at the table with executives who wouldn't give us a look before.”

TIPSHEET:

WHAT: NAACP Image Awards
WHEN: 8 p.m. Feb. 25
WHERE: Pasadena Civic Auditorium
WEB: naacpimageawards.net

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KJ Smith (below left) takes the stage. (Right) Hairstylist Derrick Monroe, Erica Campbell, social media guru Tabitha Brown and Chance Brown pose at the nominees luncheon.

