

Can critically acclaimed '12 Years a Slave' win Oscar?

Posted At : February 28, 2014 12:05 PM | Posted By : Mavis Carr

Related Categories: Entertainment, Movies

By Duane L. Richards II

Sunday marks the 86th year of the annual Academy Awards ceremony. The list of past winners includes a diverse group of artistic styles (singer Cher has won for Best Actress, rap group Three 6 Mafia for Best Original Song).

However, racial diversity has been scarce. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has only awarded one black actress, Halle Berry, with the Academy Award for Best Actress, a figure that will not change this year, as there are no black actresses nominated in that category.

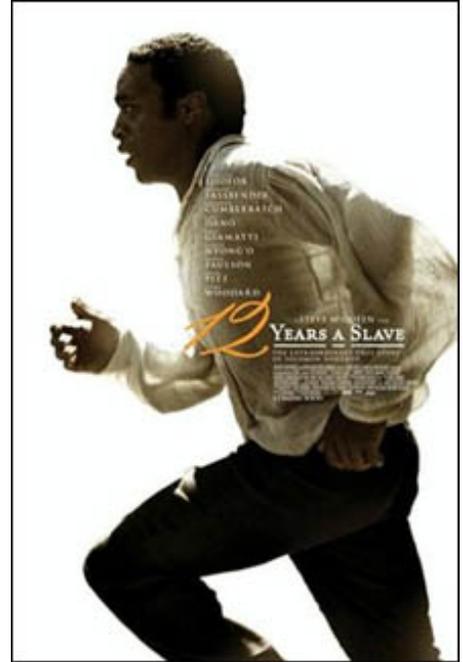
This fact became less startling when in 2012 the Los Angeles Times reported that the Academy was 94 percent white, suggesting the award recipients represent its members. Enter Steve McQueen's historical epic "12 Years a Slave." From the beginning of the year, Oscar prognosticators were predicting its critical success. When the film was released to near universal acclaim, these predictions only intensified. The film, which is based on the 1853 autobiography of the same name, follows Solomon Northup, a free man who in 1841 was kidnapped into slavery for 12 years and challenged physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Many critics hailed "12 Years a Slave" as one of the best films of the year, some hailed it as one of the best films ever made, and almost all praised it as being the most realistic account of the American slavery period in film history.

"12 Years a Slave" marks the first time that a black-produced, black-directed, and black-written film is the frontrunner for Best Picture, the night's highest honor. In October, when the film was **screened at Hampton University**, students and faculty witnessed the film before it opened in theaters.

Some students who saw it then aren't surprised about the film's current success. "Not at all!" exclaimed sophomore theater major Gavin Harden when he was asked about the Oscar buzz. "'12 Years a Slave' was a phenomenal movie. It shows the serious struggle that our ancestors went through in depth."

Junior technical theater major Olivia Whitehead was enthusiastic too: "In my opinion, I don't think the film is getting enough buzz. I think there should be more movies that shed light on past events such as that one."



The film's few detractors use comment such as Whitehead's as a negative point. Some black critics, such as Armond White, said that the film should not be heavily celebrated due to it being another entry in the historical genre that black artists are often limited to (for example, recent successes like "The Help" and "Lee Daniels' The Butler").

In addition, there are black moviegoers who declined to see the film because of its anticipated rawness, feeling that it would be too painful to watch. It is this rawness, however, that seems to be the source of its critical success.

This Sunday, the film is up for various awards including Best Adapted Screenplay for its writer John Ridley, Best Supporting Actress for newcomer Lupita Nyong'o, Best Supporting Actor for the film's main antagonist Michael Fassbender, and Best Actor for the film's star Chiwetel Ejiofor. Hampton student and Oscar enthusiast David Patton said, "Three of the actors are being nominated for an Oscar which shows you how great the cast was. The film's success does not surprise me at all."

*The writer is a student at the **Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications**.*