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Reliving History: Ryan Murphy's Hollywood Rewrites the Golden Age of Film

London Jones, Staff Reporter

Sitting down to binge-watch Ryan Murphy's newest Netflix series "Hollywood," was uplifting watching characters, some based on real actors from the Golden Age of Hollywood, get the storybook endings they deserved. Anna May Wong recognized for her talents and supported for being overlooked as O-lan in "The Good Earth", Rock Hudson able to live out as a gay man, a black woman winning the Academy Award for best actress while sitting front and center in a whites-only auditorium.

I left the series filled with optimism – for the first time in what seems like an eternity now– dreaming of this idyllic alternate reality where everyone is given the chance to show the world what it could be, not just what it is. In my mind clouded with all the issues of today, I wasn't able to immediately critique the series' oversimplification of progress and acceptance in mainstream society.



Photo via Netflix

We have to ask ourselves first, why are the generalizations in the series necessarily bad? In Murphy's words, the series is supposed to act as "this beautiful fantasy, and in these times, it could be a sort of balm in some way." It's all in the message it projects, that with the assistance of prominent white progressive executive's progress can be won simply by standing your ground, and from there opportunities aplenty magically open for underrepresented groups. This was never the case back in the Golden Age, and it's particularly not the case now.

It wasn't until 2002, that Halle Berry became the first black woman to win the Academy Award for best actress for "Monster's Ball," and she's still the only one. Out of three Asian actors to win an Oscar, Miyoshi Umeki ("Sayonara") is the only woman. We all know how we felt about Awkwafina's 2019 Oscar snub for her role in "The Farewell," which was unjustifiably placed in the foreign-language film category.

Since the birth of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, the general public has an outlet to criticize the academy for its caliber of privilege and lack of diversity – 84% of voters are white and 16% of voters are members of a minority group. These voters have the power to deem an actor, writer, director, costume designer, cinematographer, musician or director the most esteemed award in Hollywood and all of entertainment. Implicit biases, and primary leaning to acknowledge white actors (and white narratives) constantly hinders audiences from viewing rich, developed stories from a variety of minority voices. We're stuck in a loop of all-white historical dramas, cash-grabbing reboots – did anyone actually see "Gem and the Holograms" reboot –, slavery and civil rights era films all focused on displaying black-suffering, and a sprinkle of spectacular independent films that never see a wide release.

The past ten years we've seen more people of color in writing, directing and leading roles, but they're rarely widely celebrated as the brilliant creatives they are. It took Spike Lee his entire 40-year career to win his first Oscar, it took until 2020 for the Academy to give the best picture award to an Asian director and John Gielgud (1982s "Arthur") is considered the first openly gay man to win an Oscar for best-supporting actor, although he was known to rarely discuss it. Hollywood isn't, and has never, been willing to take a chance for the sake of progress until they see that it's profitable.