

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Green Book in Black and White

Darlene Conte · Wednesday, February 27th, 2019

The backlash to this year's winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture, *Green Book*, from critics to vilified posts on social media, begs further examination. Many in the African-American community are outraged, the level of vitriol is almost unprecedented for an awards show. Please consider the following viewpoint is just that: another opinion that may be considered or dispensed with depending on the reader. This is not meant to suggest that it didn't deserve the win, or that other films weren't as well deserved, only to frame the film with something that has not been discussed previously: perspective.

The story is about a white man, Tony Vallelonga, an Italian-American in the 1960s who is outspokenly racist and, through circumstance, becomes the driver for an affluent and educated African-American musician, Don Shirley. Through their journey together, Tony's forced to see the world through a new lens that allows him to change his perspective and in Hollywood fashion, his heart and mind. What this film is not is a documentary about Don Shirley. The protagonist is Tony and Don is the catalyst for Tony's change. Period. This film is not about white-washing the racism that existed in the south, if anything, the white characters are highly offensive and grotesque, there are many small "villains" who push back on Don and cause Tony to see the darker nature of his own self.

The character of Don Shirley is depicted with dignity and honor, juxtaposed to Tony's ignorant brashness. The writer's walked a line not making Tony so unlikable we weren't rooting for him, and Don wasn't so divinely inspired that he became unrelatable. But this is the story of racism in the heart of white America, and what it could look like if hearts and minds change. It is not meant as a depiction of African-American culture in the heart of the Civil Rights movement, is not bearing witness to the evils of slavery, it is not illuminating the struggle of unsung heroes who helped America reach the moon. There are other films that cover those stories. This is about a working-class white guy who came to be a better person through his friendship with someone who was different from him.

Don Shirley, the character and the man, was the hero of this story. How accurately the writers portrayed him is hotly debated. The Shirley family, from what I understand, was upset at his depiction. Was it because in real life he didn't drink or even perhaps he wasn't gay or bisexual? Was he as estranged from his family as he was portrayed? He may have been very different than how he was represented but that is called "dramatic license" and whether you like it or not, there are no "life-rights" to anyone's story who is dead. Yes, you read that correctly, once someone is dead there is nothing holding a writer back from inferring whatever they want. Perhaps the Shirley

family was upset that they weren't contacted or given any royalties for the story. But again, this was not a documentary of Don Shirley or even Tony Vallelonga... It was a dramatization of how their relationship changed Tony's life for the better. No, this film does not solve racism. And it was disappointing and short-sighted that the winners didn't mention Don Shirley in their acceptance speech. But please remember at the end of the day, it is just a trophy and no one is curing cancer in Hollywood.

Maybe you're still mad that it didn't represent racism correctly from your viewpoint, or too many white men had a hand in telling a story involving an African-American character. I hear you, it's a Sisyphean task that a film is going to be everything to everyone. Agree with me or not, it is a story we need right now because the hearts and minds that need to be changed aren't in the African-American community, the hearts and minds that need changing are the white American's who deny racism, or worse, still embrace it. So much so, they can't even stand to watch Colin Kaepernick take a knee during the national anthem. The only thing Hollywood is capable of is holding a mirror up to society. I remain hopeful that cinema will bear witness to untold stories that continue to inspire and challenge us to be better humans to each other. *Green Book* is still a beautiful story of choosing love over hate. And that is a message to which everyone can relate. (Spike Lee... You can hate on this opinion. I still loved *BlacKkKlansman* and you, too. #bestacceptancespeechspikelee)

*For another perspective on *Green Book*, please watch Yoruba Richen's documentary, *The Green Book: Guide to Freedom* which premiered on The Smithsonian Channel Monday, Feb. 25 at 8 p.m. ET/PT and is available to stream on the Smithsonian Channel app.

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