An Exploration of Successful Black Actors in Film in Relation to Education

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ABSTRACT

Blacks have been trying to fit into the acting business since the early 1900s. Today the business seems to be changing for blacks, but roles are still limited. Parts one through six take the reader through the trials and tribulations blacks have had with fitting in. Part seven examines whether education will benefit blacks in the film industry.

Introduction

“This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, and Diahann Carroll. It’s for the women that stand beside me—Jada Pinkett, Angela Basset and it’s for every nameless, faceless woman of color that now has a chance because this door has been opened.” (Halle Berry’s Speech from the Oscars 2002 http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/in_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars_2002)

It seems as if the doors of opportunity are finally opening up in the land of acting for black actors. Halle Berry and Denzel Washington won Oscars at the 2002 Academy Awards. Sidney Poitier received a lifetime achievement award. Berry and Washington made history and will continue to break down doors for more upcoming black actors. Fairness in the acting business is settling in and blacks are finally being credited, much like whites, for their talent and work in the acting business.

But are they really? It seems as though the roles for which both Berry and Washington earned Oscars are still stereotypical roles. Berry received her Academy Award for the movie Monster’s Ball, in which she portrays a poor single mother from the South who falls in love with a white man because of his help to Berry. Why did she have to be a poor single mother? Why could she not have been a middle class single mother? That example shows the audience of the Monster’s Ball that Hollywood has not stepped out of portraying stereotypical roles for blacks in film. Washington won his Oscar for the movie Training Day, where he plays a police officer who turns out to be corrupt. He influences a white man to do drugs and to hide the truth. What does this say about the acting business? Has it really
changed (or did people feel that it was about time?) What does it say about our perceptions? Many people felt it was time a black actor won an award. But were these Oscars strictly based on talent?

In this research, I will be exploring the success of black actors from past to present. In addition, I will be exploring whether or not there has been difficulty, based on being black, in succeeding in the business of acting. Does the difficulty have to do with their lack of credible training and education? And lastly, are the roles for black actors broadening or are they still limited to ones such as in the past?

These questions are among many that upcoming black actors want to know for their future careers. Today there are thousands of black actors getting into the acting business without fully knowing what they may expect in the future. Through my exploration I plan to provide useful information to those who seek an acting career and to answer as many of these questions as possible.

The History of Acting for Blacks in Film

From the beginning of the 1900s, acting was always a difficult field for blacks, whether it was being “represented as servile, ridiculous, or downright dangerous” (Stanley, pg. 304) or being cast in stereotypical roles. Black males in particular had more difficulty succeeding because of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan stereotyped black men as being filthy, drunk, and a threat to white society; especially to white women. “Bestial black characterizations reached an apotheosis of sorts in The Birth of a Nation in 1915.”(Stanley, pg. 304) This movie showed how a slave owner’s family was mistreated by a troop of black raiders. As a result, he killed many blacks, whether they were slaves or faithful servants, in retaliation to reunite the Northern and the Southern whites.

Around the 1920s, when blacks looked for work in Hollywood, they were usually cast in stereotypical roles such as servants or maids. A well known actor from the early 1930s was Lincoln Perry, who took on the name Stepin Fetchit, and who was one of the most cast actors of that time. He played in movies such as The Ghost Talks (1929), David Harum (1934) Stand Up and Cheer (1934) and Charlie Chain in Egypt (1935), where he was cast as stupid and tongue-tied. To many black actors on the rise, it may have appeared as if he had a lucrative career and was very successful. However, he still was cast only in stereotypical roles. A sad thing was that he was so convincing in these roles. Theatre-goers would get the sense that blacks were really like the roles that Perry played because it was unbelievable that someone could act so stupid and not actually be stupid. He was unable to break out of the barriers that were set around him. At that time, casting and film directors were not looking for black men to be
successful actors. In spite of what the directors wanted or were looking for, Lincoln’s success in the twenty-six movies he appeared in made many blacks want to imitate him so that they could be in movies as well. This may seem sad that young actors would want to imitate someone who is thought of as stupid, but to blacks it was thought of as a way to break into the movie business since he had great success with it. (Stanley, pg. 307)

There has been much talk about negative stereotypes, but were there any positive ones? If the environment around blacks was to change, so would stereotypes. Stereotypes seemed to change dramatically during the time of World War II. “The war’s emotional intensity seemed to exacerbate long-existing prejudices and racial tension. The summer of 1943 saw the eruption of violent race riots in Detroit and other cities, which not only hindered war production but also provided fodder for Nazi propaganda mills.” (Stanley, pg. 310) Because of the war, blacks were denied the ability to live when their decent housing and employment opportunities were taken away from them. They were also discriminated against in the army as well. The U.S. fought against the racist acts of the Nazis, but the American military was itself segregated. In spite of all the harsh happenings to blacks, unity sprung up among all races across the U.S. when the movie Bataan was made in 1943. It was made to encourage military unity among the troops and it displayed just that. Not only did Bataan involve every race, but almost everyone was equal. The movie displayed almost no forms of racism toward anyone. The production was positive for all Americans, especially blacks.

Black Actors (from 1900–1950’s) Hattie McDaniel and Paul Robeson

Even though Hattie McDaniel was known as a famous southern actor, she was actually born in Kansas. (Hine, pgs. 768-772) When McDaniel was six, her family moved from Kansas and settled in Colorado, where she spent most of her childhood and teenage years. McDaniel started her acting career when she performed in minstrel shows. Since McDaniel was black, the stereotypical roles for women at that time were servants and maids. Her father headed a vaudeville group called The Henry McDaniel Show that costarred two of her brothers. In 1924 she began to sing on radio stations in Colorado which led to very successful traveling on the black entertainment circuit. She was then booked as a blues singer through the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), a group that launched music careers of blues singers. (It was later referred to as Tough on Black Asses because of the treatment the singers received.) In 1931 she moved to L.A. and found jobs singing and appearing in movies. McDaniel’s first movie was The Golden West, which was set in the south. That same year she was cast in a role that was big enough to gain recognition in The Blonde Venus.
After that she began to appear all over film in such movies as *I’m no Angel, Alice Adams, The Mad Miss Manton,* and *Show Boat,* in which she played a maid. McDaniel established herself as a well known actress by being one of the most famous maids that she could be. She made it seem acceptable for other actresses to feel comfortable with playing a maid, when she was quoted as saying, “I’d rather play a maid than be one.” (Hine, pg. 770) She had a fabulous career in Hollywood during the 1930s and ‘40s. This for a black actress was amazing considering the 1930s was a time when the acting business presented few or no opportunities for black talent. She overcame the stereotypes and used them to her advantage which gained her respect and an Oscar for the role she played as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind.*

Paul Robeson was not only an actor, but an activist, a singer, and a lawyer. At an early age, Robeson experienced the loss of both family and finances. (Smith, pg. 1016) When he was six, he lost his mother, Maria Louisa Bustill, to a house fire. Just a few years later his father, William Drew Robeson, lost his Princeton pastorate. In 1909 the family moved to New Jersey where his father got his pastorate back and became a pastor at St. Thomas AME Zion Church. Robeson was enrolled in Somerville High School where there was only one other black student. In spite of that, Robeson excelled in many of the activities that the school had to offer such as debate, oratory contests, and football. He had his first encounter with acting when he played the lead in *Othello.* Robeson did an exceptional job at this school and was offered a full scholarship to Rutgers University. All the other males in his family went to all black colleges. He accepted the scholarship to Rutgers. Rutgers was a school where there were still few black students, and where he began to experience both fame and racism. He tried out for the varsity football team where blacks were not wanted, but he was accepted to the team anyway. He was brutalized, but that did not stop him. During practice he was tackled hard to make it difficult for him to stay. He graduated with fifteen letters, had the highest grade point average of his class, and he gave the oration at Rutgers 153rd Commencement. After graduation he moved to New York City to attend New York University. He later transferred to Columbia where he got involved in more acting. He sang in the chorus of the musical *Shuffle Along* and later that year made his debut acting in *Simon the Cyrenian,* where he had the lead role. This role was the start for Robeson to play more lead roles in plays such as *Taboo, All God’s Chillun Got Wings, The Emperor Jones, Rosanne,* and the movie *Body and Soul.* These roles were still all minor roles when his career began to take off in 1928. He accepted a role as Joe in the play *Show Boat.* In 1930 he accepted the lead role in *Othello* again. He was given much more credit now than ever because he was beginning to make history. Robeson was the first black man ever to be cast in a production by the Savoy Theatre.
in London. In addition to all these great accomplishments in Robeson’s life, he achieved many other things such as becoming a professional singer, which he had established along the way of acting, activism which he decided to pursue after his college experiences, and finally a lawyer, because he was sued by his wife in a case she won. Robeson was given a lifetime achievement award after he died because of his dedication and talent. “Paul Robeson was truly a man who saw commitment to the oppressed and particularly black people, as a much more profound calling than the accolades he received for his astonishing talents. His extraordinary voice and engaging acting abilities would have undoubtedly brought him more fame, fortune and approval than the activist role he pursued instead.” (Smith, pg. 1016)

**The 1950’s-1990: Acting for Blacks in Film**

“The wartime plotline of a noble black person winning over whites and making them feel better for the experience continued well into postwar period.” (Stanley, pg 310) Following the war, the worst of the racial occurrences disappeared. *Lilies of the Field*, starring Sidney Poitier, showed that blacks were able to step up to the plate and be independent. This movie “showed a black assuming his responsibilities with strength and skill in a natural, amicable relationship with a group of whites dependent on him.” (Ploski, pg. 1231) In 1950, new stereotypes began to come about. Instead of blacks playing roles such as maids and servants, they were now playing roles of nobility.

Sidney Poitier kicked down the doors of stereotypes when he played the first role of nobility. Poitier was born in 1927. He made his screen debut in the movie *No Way Out* in 1950 as a dedicated doctor. Over the next twenty years Poitier played many roles of nobility that made the media call him “Super Sidney” (Stanley, pg. 311). Even though Poitier was cast as nobility, for the most part, he played only parts that had racial issues involved. Poitier received an Honorary Oscar in 2002, for the roles he played in *Goodbye My Lady Cry; The Beloved Country; The Jackal; In the Heat of the Night;*, and *They Call Me Mr. Tibbs*. He was the first black person to win best actor award for *Lilies of the Field* in 1963.

In the late 1960s more rioting occurred when Malcolm X was killed. The “brotherly–love” (Stanley, pg. 311) movies that were being made were attacked for being “out of tune with the racial tenor of times.” (Stanley, pg. 311) The riots did not last very long because in 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court banned any segregation laws that did not allow interracial dating. In that same year the movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* debuted, in which Poitier played the role of a brilliant doctor dating a white woman named Joey Drayton. They fall in love and get engaged and then it
is time to meet the parents. Everything goes well between the couple’s parents and they are wed.

Because of this movie and Poitier’s strong characterization, he “helped to break down racial barriers in Hollywood and broaden the range of roles open to black actors of succeeding generations” (Stanley, pg. 312) Poitier became a producer and director in the 1970s, a move which created more opportunities for blacks.

Themes that were not supposed to be talked about or displayed began being discussed. Previously, people would never cross the line with blacks verses whites, or vice versa, but now those issues became open because of all the movies being made regarding interracial dating. “When blacks began to assert themselves with a more strident form of protest during the 1960s, the film industry took note.” (Ploski, pg. 1231) *Uptight* (1968), was a movie that was based on events in major ghettos after the assassination of Martin Luther King. As black actors were on the rise and black themes became more of a subject, Gordon Parks became the first black film director for a major studio. He directed the movie *The Learning Tree* (1969). Next was Melvin Van Peebles with his first independent film entitled *The Night the Sun Came Out* (1970), which made history when it grossed over ten million dollars. Soon after these “greats” came many more (such as Spike Lee and John Singleton) to allow opportunities for blacks to act and get their name out there. After this huge explosion of black directors directing movies, the major studios saw the potential in that and gave great acknowledgement to black directors and actors, giving them opportunities to work side by side with some of the “greats” like Gordon Parks and Mario Van Peebles. In 1970, the film industry began to produce many movies with the black audience in mind. Most of them were action hero movies that had very handsome and charming looking men in them. These films made large amounts of money and helped to rejuvenate a financially descending Hollywood. Hollywood was gaining benefits from the “black film boom,” while the new films were causing identity problems with black audiences. “By the summer of 1972, national media attention had been drawn towards the phenomenon which had acquired the label blaxploitation.” (Ploski, pg.1232) That is when the accusation that Hollywood was living off black films came about, but no blacks who wanted to speak were in position to say anything. From 1969 through the mid 1970s, Hollywood released an average of fifteen films featuring blacks as strong, sexually charged characters frequently at war with traditional American society. These movies were aimed at black audiences, but they were produced by whites. (Rhines, pg. 38)

Many people did not like what they saw. Blacks of authority began to come together and talk about the issues of blacks and how they are basically being robbed in terms of image as well as financially. (Ploski, pgs.

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When *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist* came out in 1972 and 1973, Hollywood realized that there was no reason to put blacks on screen because they were making money from black audiences without having to cast blacks in movies. One-third of the box office earnings from *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist* were from the black community. Blacks were uncomfortable with the way they had been deceived and again wanted to speak out about how they were first being misrepresented and then giving all their money to support Hollywood by going to see *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist*. There were several groups that finally decided there was something that needed to be done about this misrepresentation of blacks. Leadership groups such as the NAACP, Push, Core and the Urban League were speaking out against misleading images in movies being made. Most were afraid that it was black people doing the white man’s job and blacks not really getting credit for it. They said that those actors were only imitating the white man’s roles instead of portraying their own. Many of the leadership groups said that most of the films represented too much violence and too many negative characters such as pimps and drug dealers. While these leadership groups pointed out that blacks were doing “the white man’s job,” on the other hand they were saying that when blacks finally did represent themselves they were being misrepresented by sending themselves into another type of stereotype; drug dealers and pimps, etc. As a result of these leadership groups’ speaking out, “blaxploitation” ended and a new era began.

Approximately 400 black actors began to wonder where the image of blacks in contemporary film was going. As a result, a group formed called The Coalition Against Blaxploitation. The purpose of this group was to talk with studio and industry union heads regarding the image of blacks on the screen and what the improvements should be. The successes of films such as *Shaft* (1971) were unexpected and very soon there were proposals to do many more films like it. “In what could be described as a sudden explosion, there were scores of films boasting more blacks working before the cameras, and as a part of the crews, than Hollywood had ever witnessed at any time in its history.”

Many got tired of the film era with action heroes and soon began to beg for something new. Comedy had a negative acceptance rate among many black actors because they thought that it would lead blacks back into stereotypical roles. This is where Richard Pryor came into play. He was a street comic who was tough talking and funny. He collaborated with Sidney Poitier in a movie called *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974). This was yet another opportunity for blacks to be involved in film because the film was predominantly for black actors. Comedy continued to have a good effect with the movie audience. Two independent film makers saw this to be true and took matters into their own hands. Spike Lee and Robert
Townsend made their own films which employed predominantly black actors and were for mostly black audiences. Spike Lee directed *She's Got to Have It* (1986) and Robert Townsend directed *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), which was a movie that made fun of racial stereotypes. The comic era was carried on by the great Eddie Murphy and is continuing to be carried on currently by the new comedians such as Chris Rock, Chris Tucker, Anthony Anderson, and Mike Epps. Comedy was another road that blacks took to their advantage. Blacks believed this was another way to break into the acting business.

**Black Actors (from 1950-1999) Diahann Carroll and Denzel Washington**

“For Diahann Carroll, as for many other black entertainers, success has sometimes been a two-edged sword, giving her notoriety in the mainstream but separating her from her roots. She once complained that she was a black woman with a white image.” (Hine, pg. 219) Carroll was born in the Bronx, New York. She was a pretty girl at a very young age and as a result she won a Metropolitan Opera scholarship and a talent contest for the *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scout*. She attended high school at a performing arts school and from there went on to be a model for *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Sepia* magazines. Carroll at the same time was studying psychology at New York University, but soon left because she won a costarring role in the musical *House of Flower* (1954). She made her debut in film when she played in *Carmen Jones*. Carroll then returned to Broadway and won a Tony award for the show *No Strings* in 1962. In 1968 she made history in Hollywood when she played a single black career woman and mother in the television show *Julia*. “This was the first TV show to star a black personality, and her character’s dignified occupation as a nurse was a significant improvement over the stereotypical roles often assigned to black performers on TV in the 1950s and 1960s.” (http://www.biography.com/features/sweethearts/dcarroll.html) Carroll won a Golden Globe Award for best actress and the same year she was nominated for an Emmy for the role of the single mother she played in *Julia*. She was also nominated for an Emmy for the role she played in *A Different World*, and she was nominated for an Academy Award for the role she played as a single welfare mother in *Claudine* (1974). Carroll was proud of all her success she had on television and in film. She was accepted as an actor and to demonstrate how successful she was, she said “I wanted to be the first black bitch on television.” (Hine, pgs. 219-221)

“Denzel Washington is a leading actor with a reputation for selecting quality roles.” (Smith, Jesse Carney, pg. 1186) He has made his way to the top by his outstanding performances in movies such as *A Soldier’s Story* (1989) and *Malcolm X* (1992). He became one of only five black actors to win an Academy Award for best supporting actor in the
movie *Glory* (1989). He also won an Oscar for best actor in *Training Day* (2001). Washington had his first exposure to acting at Fordham University in upstate New York. Some of his first productions were *The Emperor Jones* and *Othello* where he was cast as the lead in both. Washington had some problems due to poor grades early on in Fordham that caused him to drop out.

In 1977 he was offered a professional role to star in a made-for-television movie called *Wilma*. He had much success with this role and others began to pour in. He turned them down because he did not have his degree, and he went back to Fordham to take up journalism and drama. He graduated with a degree in both and was ready to act, but not before taking his acting skills one step further. He went on to study at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, California where he starred in many of the plays, including *Man and Superman* and *Moonchildren*.

The tuition went up at Washington’s college to more than he could afford. By the end of his first year, he had learned all he needed to and dropped out to start his career in Los Angeles. Having no success in Los Angeles he went back to Mount Vernon, New York, where he would reunite with his mom and soon to be wife. (Upon his arrival to Mount Vernon, he ran into a girl who had co-starred in the movie *Wilma* and they soon were married.) In frustrations and guilt for leaving the conservatory school in San Francisco, he became a non-active actor for a couple of years. His wife was tired of seeing him so depressed and encouraged Washington to get his career back in gear. Satisfied with the decision to become active again, he landed his next role almost immediately after his decision in the hit movie comedy *Carbon Copy* (1981). Having tremendous box office success still would not give Washington the success he had hoped and dreamed for. After finishing the movie Washington went to work at a recreation center teaching sports and acting, but just a week before he had to report to work he was cast in a role he had auditioned for. He landed the role of Malcolm X in the movie *When the Chickens Come Home to Roost* (1982). This role and another in *A Soldier’s Play* (1989) started an upward turn in his career. Washington’s career fully developed and he became a well established actor when he played in many other roles. One that especially touched the lives and hearts of others was when he played the powerful title role in the movie *Malcolm X* (1992).

Washington has built himself a strong career in acting and is continuing to build his career in production and directing. He recently made his directorial debut with the movie *Antowne Fisher* (2002), and has been named “one of America’s most favorite actors.” (Smith, pg. 1186)
1990-Present: Acting for Blacks in film

“The issue of race has shifted to Hollywood’s front burner.” (Masters, March 24, 1996) The roles for blacks have increased in the last decade, but still have limits. Jesse Jackson was so outraged with the way blacks in the film industry have been misrepresented that he planned to protest about it. He believes that the problem lies with the fact that there is little or no control behind the cameras which would limit the number of black films being produced and ultimately limit the roles for blacks to act or portray. Hollywood’s response to that was simply that black films do not bring in enough income to keep these movies in production so there are only so many that can be made. Additionally it was said that the reasoning for low income was because the advertising was reaching only the twenty five and younger crowd. The production companies reach out to “hip hop” radio stations and magazines which appeal only to that age group: i.e., primarily a black audience. As a result, the twenty five and younger ages show up. Hollywood responded with “This is who comes?” and the black community responded with “This is who you invite.” (Masters, March 24, 1996)

In 1992 Box Office Magazine reported that blacks owned only seven theaters throughout the U.S. (Everyone who owns theaters has control over what movies are played in their theaters.) This writer asked Gary M. Lazich, the manager of Cinema 8 theaters, Duluth, MN, “Why don’t all black movies that are released nationally come to the Cinema Eight and Lakes 10?” The manager replied, “We are out to satisfy our audience and make a profit off of the movies that are played at these theaters.” The manager then questioned why he would pay to have all black movies come here if they are not going to make any profit. (Lazich, interview)

The people behind film seem to always have problems with the business. Whether it was due to the lack of black films being put out and blacks being represented incorrectly, or because of the lack of money being made from films, both have long been unsettling issues that need to be dealt with. “The old negative stereotypes still enjoy some cinematic currency.” (Stanley, pg. 312) Star Wars: Episode I- The Phantom Menace (1999) is a recent movie with stereotypes of black people. In this movie the caricature Jar Jar Binks has many characteristics of a stereotypical black person such as big lips, a wide nose, and bulging eyes. Something also happens in the movie where his tongue gets stuck in an electrical socket and his speech becomes impaired. He talks like a stereotypical black person talks in the past and now. He says lines like, “Why mesa always da one?” and “Yousa Jedi not all yousa cracked up to be.” This is one example of the casting issues that are still occurring.
“It would be a folly, though, to think that race and gender have become immaterial in the casting process.” (Cohen, pg. 21) Casting and breaking out of stereotypical roles have become great successes for black actors as a whole. It is now said that blacks are found everywhere in film and television and more and more on Broadway. Black actors are mainstream now. They are represented in American films and television “at approximately the same level (roughly 12%) as they are in the U.S. population overall.” (Cohen, pg. 21) Blacks represent an even higher percentage on Broadway. Since the late 1990s blacks have represented up to 30% of the actors on television. Blacks are no longer stereotyped into criminal roles. These roles are now given to white males or females as well. Blacks now appear just as often in roles such as “business, managerial, and professional occupations, than as blue collar, clerical or unemployed.” (Cohen, pg. 21)

Black Actors (from 2000-Present) Taye Diggs and Halle Berry

“This charismatic rising star made an auspicious film debut as Winston, the young Jamaican who falls for an older woman (Angela Bassett), in How Stella Got Her Groove Back (1998).” (www.hollywood.com) Taye Diggs was a New Jersey native, but was raised in upstate New York. He went to Syracuse University where he earned his degree in musical theatre. After completing his degree, he soon landed his first role in Carousel (1994) by Rodgers and Hammerstein. He then followed that performance with a role in the hit musical Rent (1995-96). Next he mildly entered the television world with guest appearances on shows such as Guiding Light and New York Undercover. He then took the acting world by storm when he appeared in The Wood (1999) and The Best Man (1999), both movies with marital themes. In 2002 Diggs appeared in the movie Equilibrium, Just a Kiss, and the hit romantic comedy Brown Sugar. His most recent work is his portrayal of the band leader in the hit musical Chicago. Diggs’ career is young and fresh and will continue to be on the rise for many years to come.

“Ask the actress Halle Berry what effect race has had on her career and you’re more than likely to receive a conflicted response.” (Thompson, pg. 62) Berry started her dreams to be an aspiring model. When she found that her dream would soon be a nightmare, she changed her plans. Berry was sad to have won many beauty pageants and many teen and Miss USA contests, and to have her hopes set on being a model and then being told that she was not tall enough. She went to Europe to seek other opportunities in modeling and found that their standards for height were even higher. She gave up modeling and moved to New York to try acting. Berry had many nights where she slept in homeless shelters because she was so determined
to pursue her career in acting. She had little hope until she sent out a tape of what she looked like and what she could do. Casting directors thought she was mediocre, but could not get over how gorgeous she was. Berry was cast in her first role as a model in a television sitcom *Living Dolls*. After the show was canceled Berry moved to Los Angeles where she landed another role on a soap opera *Knots Landing*.

Her big break came when she was cast in the movie *Jungle Fever*, a movie based on interracial dating. This movie gained Berry many acknowledgements and brought more roles her way. She landed many more roles in movie such as *The Last Boy Scout* (1991), *Boomerang* (1992), *The Flintstones* (1994), *Losing Isaiah* (1995), *B.A.P.S.* (1997), and *Why do Fools Fall in Love* (1998). All the experiences that she had had with these previous roles would do nothing for her, however, when it came time for her to do a movie based on a true story of Dorothy Dandridge, a black American icon. Berry was much like Dorothy in many ways. They both were born into biracial families and both began their careers by looks alone. The movie gained Berry great success and recognition. She also won a Golden Globe Award, a Screen Actors Guild Award, three NAACP Awards, and a Entertainer of the Year Award. “Introducing Dorothy Dandridge earned some of the highest ratings in HBO’s history as well as plaudits from critics.” (Thompson, pg. 64) Berry has now done many co-starring roles with great well known actors in such movies as *Swordfish* (with John Travolta), and *Die Another Day* (with Pierce Brosnan). “While Berry, the daughter of an black father and a white mother, often expresses a wariness about dwelling too much on her biracial heritage, she has at the same time exhibited a professional commitment to confounding stereotypes, having played a wide variety of roles in movies and on television.”(Thompson, pg. 62)

Berry is having great success in her career, winning awards and recognition. She now pushes for other black women to do the same. She said that it is time for black women to be included as much in Hollywood as white women are. She believes that black women are still being held back from roles of authority and influence and she blames that on the lack of opportunities for minorities. She says that black women not only need to press for acting positions, but directing and producing ones as well. “I feel opportunities for women of color are just not there, and this poses a challenge to us all, to press for more inclusion.” (Breathwaite, pg. 50)

**Education (BFA, MFA, and Training Programs): Past and Present**

Education has always been the most essential part of a proper upbringing of a child. For a black child, education is definitely essential, but not all children growing up have the choice of education. *Ebony* magazine takes
the reader down memory lane to expose the lack of education blacks had growing up because of segregation. (Jones, pg. 69) In 1945, the year the Ebony magazine was born and World War II ended, the world of education was divided along racial lines. Almost all black children went to segregated schools. The problems of segregation were especially bad in the South. The black children were forced to go to run down schools and learn through the use of old and outdated books. Black children still pressed forward and went to college. Most black college students attended black colleges, and in 1945 these colleges were the “educational cornerstones” (Jones, pg. 69) of the community. The United Negro College Fund was established because the demands for funding to black students were limited.

Black professors taught at black institutions, though there were some exceptions that were allowed which made it possible for black professors to teach in non all-black institutions. In 1941 Dr. Allison Davis was appointed to a full time position at the University of Chicago. Dr. Abram L. Harris had the same opportunity four years later, but blacks wanted more from an educational standpoint.

Black students and attorneys joined together and changed the social and educational situations for blacks. Thurgood Marshall, along with the students and attorneys, took four school segregation cases to the Supreme Court which ruled in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision that segregation in public schools was not in accordance with the political constitution.

In the North blacks were very active against segregation in schools. In New Rochelle, New York, a federal school board had created a Lincoln high school to be segregated. The judge ordered the board to desegregate all of the predominantly black schools in the area. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, prohibiting discrimination in voting, education, and the use of public facilities. One year later congress passed the Elementary and Secondary School Education Act, which provides funds under Title I to promote racial integration in nationwide public schools. The acts that were issued brought new opportunities for blacks in the ‘70s.

By the fall of 1972, forty-four percent of black students in the South attended predominantly white schools, but only thirty percent attended white schools in the North. By the mid-seventies, only twelve percent of black students in the U.S. remained in segregated schools.

“The 1960s affirmative action programs helped black professors as much as they helped black students. Although there were more than 200 hundred blacks with doctoral degrees in1945 in the North and West, there were only fifteen blacks in formerly all-white facilities, up from the two in 1941. But by 1960, 5910 blacks were employed as college and university teachers. This represented slightly more than three percent of the total number of college and university teachers nationwide.” (Jones, pg. 70) Dr.
Mary Frances Berry was the first black woman to head a major university. She later became the first black woman to hold the post of assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education.

“There were a number of setbacks in the ‘70s and ‘80s for blacks. Many of the instructional and financial assistant programs set aside for urban schools during this period were all but disbanded.” (Jones, pg. 69) The Supreme Court began to revoke many of its previous affirmative action and civil rights rulings. Regardless of the setbacks blacks faced, they continued to gain ground in the ‘90s. Black students made huge improvements in the classroom. Figures in the ‘90s showed that blacks represented 9.8 percent of the 1.4 million students enrolled in college and the rate of minorities with four or more years of college. But not only were the students breaking ground, so were the professionals.

Professionals are now major metropolitan area school superintendents. Others are board members, principals and even heads of respected educational trade groups. In 1991 black professors represented about four percent of the 371,000 professors in American colleges. The latest data show that an unknown number of black women hold the top post at some of America’s historically black and white institutions.

It seems that the black Americans are finally being treated fairly as far as education, but then there are others who feel different. William H. Gray, the president of the United Negro College Fund said “Despite our gains, education has not been sufficient to overcome racial barriers, it has improved opportunities for African Americans, but all of the data clearly show that even with PhD’s, compare to their white counterparts, blacks are still at a disadvantage.” (Jones, pg. 76) There are other experts who agree with Gray. Blacks are no better off in education now (1995) than they were in 1945. “The ones who are in the system now are probably not much better off because of the lack of resources, attention, and the socioeconomic conditions in their homes,” says Dr. Berry, chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. “Unequal funding for schools and racial isolation remain problems, and the poorest of our people are in fact, some might argue, worse off.” (Jones, pg. 76)

Although the challenges of the next fifty years remain cloudy, the future of blacks in education looks promising. Dr. Samuel Myers, president of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education, states “As I see it, in spite of all of the court challenges we’ve faced, in spite of all of the problems, in spite of all of the pathologies that people talk about, this really has been a golden age with respect to the education of blacks.” (Jones, pg. 76)

One who has proved the importance of education for blacks is Tim Reid. Tim Reid is black actor/producer/writer who talks about his experiences with education and how education has affected his life.
Hawkins, pg.18) Reid does not regret not having gone to school for film and television. Instead, he got a degree in business and marketing. Even though it took him twenty years to get to where he is now as an actor/producer/writer he does admit that having a degree in theatre might have helped him get to where he is now a bit faster. He says that film school provided the technical and instructional information technique that he needed. He stated that if he would have just gone through film school he would have learned what he needed to learn to open up his own film studio, called United Image Entertainment. Going through film school would have allowed for Reid to take only a few years to gain the actual experience needed for his studio.

Instead he went to Norfolk State University in Virginia where his undergrad experience was one that would tie his life together. Norfolk was a black college that prepared blacks in their careers for what it was going to be like when they graduated. Norfolk influenced his acting and filmmaking career. He was a “street kid” finishing high school and he thought he was going to get through college the same way he got through high school; by his street smarts. When he went to Norfolk he had a rude awakening because they were so hard on him. He said that he was dealing with “real professionals.” Reid said the professors “knew it all” and knew how to deal with blacks with “street smarts” because they had been there and done what they had done. He said it felt so good to have someone who related to him. He believed that blacks who want the best training should go to predominantly black colleges. Reid graduated from Norfolk with a business degree and some acting experience. He took the business degree he obtained from Norfolk and moved to Chicago to work for Du Pont. Outside of working he spent a lot of time volunteering at local schools’ drug programs. This is when Reid met Tom Dreesen. They became a nightclub act called the “Tim and Tom” show. The act lasted six years until they grew apart. He went to acting school, but soon dropped out and started to work at a topless bar as a comedian. He eventually landed a role in television with the Frankie Avalon summer series. From there he went on to do commercials and other works. He is most famous for his role in WKRP in Cincinnati (1978). He went on to appear in movies such as Snoops (1989) and Simon and Simon (1981). Reid also appeared in many hit television shows like Matlock (1987), Frank’s Place (1987), Highlander (1993), and Sister Sister (1994-99).

With his degree he was able to connect with the people with whom he did business. Reid said that it was amazing to him that he was able to act, produce and write without having formal academic training in film or cinema education. While Reid says “I’m an advocate of education” (Hawkins, pgs. 18-22) he believes there are ways to get to where you want to go without taking the most obvious route.
Jeanmarie Simpson says that there are many actors who are successful without an MFA. Simpson is a great actress who never obtained an MFA. Simpson researched MFA training and its effects on the actor. Simpson stated that actors with that much training (MFA) tend to overemphasize diction and speech and overanalyze text and language. By having an MFA degree and overemphasizing on diction, this might get in the way of the actors’ having courage. She states that the actors that are seen in auditions with an MFA tend to be robotic and soulless. She suggests if actors do decide to obtain an MFA, to also maintain their freshness. She further suggests to be your own actor, but do not feel an MFA will make you a better actor. There are others who agree with Simpson like Sonia Moore.

Sonia Moore, the author of *The Stanislavski’s System* asks why waste money going to college when actors can take studio classes for less money than the price of college. (Moore) Moore believes that one can be a successful actor without having university or conservatory training. She states that a studio will offer the same thing that a university or conservatory would, but the advantages at a studio are even more than those at a college or university. For example, at a studio the ages of actors is a large range so the teachings are on a general basis. In addition, there are no college fees and the classes are not all day long. Feedback is received without being graded on how well you did. Actors can learn and grow at their own pace and audition when they are ready. A studio also does not give one just four or five years to grow as an actor, a studio will teach actors as long as they are willing to learn.

There are others who believe that formal training in the field will best prepare them for whatever they are going into. (Moore, pgs. 117-125) Moore stated how necessary it is for an actor to train more now than they did in years past because acting is in a different place now than it was before. The advantages of a college education are essential now because as in any other profession, training is what is needed. Acting is like any other job where competition grows more and more. Having training and education is a large part of being successful and not only education, but higher education as well.

James Bundy explains in the *American Theatre Magazine*, not only how important it is to have higher education, but to attend the proper graduate school as well. (Bundy, pg. 6) Bundy is a conservatory head as well as an artistic director of the Yale School of Drama. As someone on the inside of a graduate program, Bundy says that he would be the one to speak about a graduate program versus those who speak from the outside. He states the profession doesn’t pay attention to the little things that training programs offers. He states “the subject of training for the theatre is often reduced to statistics instead of ideas, values and sources of inspiration.”
(Bundy, pg. 6) *The U.S. News and World Report* ranks the Yale School of Drama as the number one graduate school for actors. He goes on to say that if Yale is right for you, then you should go. He does not think that students should go by rankings, but by interests. Bundy said that most of the students there have interviewed students and faculty to decide if Yale is the school for them. The students then determine for themselves if the program is right for them. Just because the school is ranked as one of the best does not mean that it is the best for everyone. Bundy says that at these training programs the professors take responsibility for the training of the students and not the work that they produce. Students come to graduate school to receive a lifetime of learning and creativity. He admits that not everyone who leaves a training program has maximized their potential, but that goes for ever profession. He relates it to a doctor receiving his M.D., which does not mean that he is ready to go perform surgery. He says “the lessons of training often take root months or years after graduation.” (Bundy, pg. 62) In his opinion, in America the number of actors interested in theatre is smaller then anyone wants to admit, and far smaller than the number of MFA programs around the country. He adds that the less the talent the actor has, the longer it will take for the actor to incorporate the training into his work.

Bundy says that having training programs is necessary and that an actor should have training. Training is a once in a lifetime opportunity and “the role of outstanding training programs is to nurture the artist who may have a major impact on the imaginative life of our country.” (Bundy, pg. 63)

There are other sources that do not say whether a degree versus training is important. The Occupational Outlook Handbook lists its outline to the road of success for an actor. (Gale Research Inc., pg. 125) It states that people who become actors take many paths. It states that all actors need some type of formal training; whether actors train through a university program or an acting conservatory, the training is very necessary. However it does say that some people enter the field without it and become just as successful. Demi Moore, Keanu Reeves, Jim Carrey and Whoopi Goldberg are all high school dropouts. They are all examples of how successful one can be without any education. (Seipp, pg. 159) The handbook goes on to say that some even go for their MFA in acting, but to be successful, “Actors need talent, creative ability, and training that will enable them to portray different characters.” (Gale Research Inc., pg. 125) One who is able to do just that is Angela Basset.

Basset is one of those black actors who went to college to obtain an MFA in drama. (Graham, pgs.19-21) She attended Yale University for her undergraduate degree in theatre studies. After receiving her degree, she enrolled in the Yale School of Drama for her MFA. When she graduated,
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she moved to New York where she found an agent. Basset had a rough time finding work in the acting business, so to make ends meet she worked as a secretary in a skin care salon and later as a photo researcher at *U.S. News and World Report*. While working for this magazine, she landed her first role in *Antigone* and later that year was asked to tour with the *Negro Ensemble Company*. She then went on to appear in television and after several appearances on *The Cosby Show* (1988) and *227* (1988), she landed her first movie role. The role was minor, but it was a start. The role was in a Robert Mandel’s comedy suspense called *F/X* (1986). Basset has gone on to star in many films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *What’s Love Got to Do with It* (1993), which won her a Golden Globe award along with a Academy Award nomination. She later went on to star in the hit movie *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) and *How Stella got her Groove Back* (1998). She has always been known to play dominant and strong black roles in the movie industry. No matter what movie she has played in, she has always been its back bone. Even though she is an actor who is not “drop dead gorgeous,” she is an actor with prestige and status. She is an actor with much respect, training and knowledge of how to become a successful actor.

There are, of course, many people who break into the acting business without any training except for real life experiences. One of those people would be Vivica A. Fox. (Gale Group, 1999) She is one who does not have the educational background, but is beautiful. She is known for her “home girl” persona and her ability to stand out among many actors. Unlike Basset she did not go to school for a degree in drama. Fox graduated from high school and moved to California to attend Golden West College. She knew at a very young age that she was going to be a performer of some sort. She said that when she got home from school, she would get right to her homework so that she would be able to read the magazine articles about show business before it was time for bed. While she attended Golden West, she worked at a restaurant on Sunset Boulevard, where her life would take a turn for the best. She was working one day and one of the customers suggested that she give his friend a call. The customer was a film producer and she made the call. Soon she was going to auditions and winning roles on television such as *Matlock, Days of Our Lives, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and Out All Night*. After the rise of this young talented actress, the script writer for the movie *Independence Day* (1996) asked her to come in and audition. She did and got the part of Will Smith’s wife. After the box office success of that film, she was offered many roles. Fox said she no longer auditions for roles, but instead has meetings to discuss parts. This was all because one script writer believed in her. Fox has gone on to do such films such as *Set It Off* (1997), *Booty Call* (1997), *Soul Food* (1997),
Why Do Fools Fall in Love (1998), Two Can Play That Game (2001), and Juwanna Man (2002).

Conclusion: Where do we go from here? What has to happen?

Where do we go from here? Halle Berry has opened doors for black women by being the first black woman to receive an Oscar for best actress. Denzel Washington, in that same night, also won an Oscar for best male actor. Sidney Poitier topped the night off by being honored with an Oscar as well. Not only have there been Oscars won, but roles are becoming less stereotypical. The film industry is slowly but surely accepting blacks into the acting business. More and more black films are being put out and blacks are finally making progress.

Education has changed and is still changing today. Schools went from being segregated to desegregated and blacks now have equal opportunities to receive an education. Because those opportunities are there blacks need to take advantage of the training programs that are available to them to really understand and master their craft as an actor. There are many beliefs as to whether or not actors should get training and at what level. Actors should obtain whatever level of training they feel necessary. Every program is not for everyone so actors should enroll in programs they feel will suit their needs as an actor. Knowledge of the film industry can only help an actor. Actors who do not know what step to take next and what roles are appropriate for them may be because they do not have the correct knowledge of the business.

With equal opportunities in acting and education, blacks are auditioning and are getting cast in more roles in film. The movie The Matrix (1999) was an all white cast except for Lawrence Fishburne and the Oracle, but in the Matrix Reloaded (2003) the sequel to the Matrix, there were approximately ten black cast members featured in the movie. Blacks are also making more black movies as well. These movies are not primarily directed and produced by blacks but there are black movies being put out with primarily black casts. Two Can Play That Game (2001), Barber Shop (2002), and Deliver us from Eva (2003) were released in theatres over the last three years. I believe this is a good sign, but why do movies need to feature either an all black cast or an all white cast? The film industry is on the rise for blacks with the movies that have been released, however the industry needs to take the next step and incorporate both blacks and whites that are equally cast. Bring it On (2000) was a great movie that showed a variety of black and white actors. In that movie the plot was not about who was black or white, the plot was about cheerleading. The film industry needs to get back to central issues and plots versus casting actors on the basis of color.
How can this happen? I believe that there needs to be more blacks behind the camera as well as in front of it. By blacks being behind the camera, I believe there is more of a chance of something being done or said on black people's behalf. There also has to be more black producers and directors because they have the decision of who gets cast and what the movie is going to focus on. Blacks can provide roles for other blacks.

Secondly, blacks need to be in opposition when it comes to stereotypical roles. If there is no one to play these roles then the stereotypes will be lessened. Even though there will be people who feel that these roles need to played, and money to be made, blacks should still oppose such roles. Lastly, blacks need to educate themselves about the film industry. One reason why there are only a handful of well known black actors may be because of the lack of knowledge blacks have about the industry along with the lack of training.

Blacks are making progress in the film industry by knowing the business as well as knowing their craft. The film industry is not where it needs to be for blacks with regard to equal opportunity, but it is a long way from where it was. There is still a long way to go to make the future look more promising for blacks. However, the future requires that there be more equality and role availability or history will repeat itself.
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