

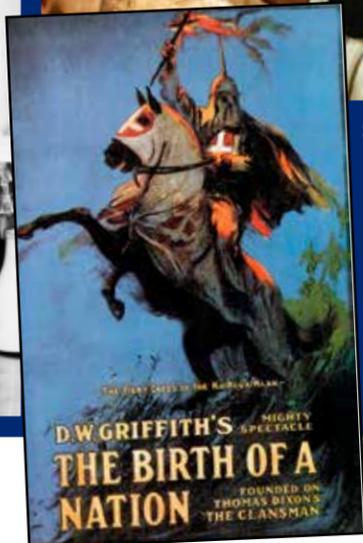
**THE SCANDALS  
HOLLYWOOD IGNORED**

**THE UGLY TRUTH  
ABOUT RACISM  
IN THE LAND  
OF THE FREE**

**H**ollywood likes to toast itself for its supposed liberalism, while right-wing blowhards lambast it for the same reason. But while the Hollywood of 2022 may be largely inclusive, it wasn't always the case.

One of the film industry's most venerated directors was behind one of the most racially offensive movies of all time. D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was set during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era that followed, it depicts the Ku Klux Klan as saviours of a South ravaged by immoral black people (mostly played by white actors in blackface). Griffith's epic proved so successful it boosted Klan membership – a grotesque legacy for a film fuelled by hatred.

Roles for black actors at the time were few and far between. Perhaps the most successful actor of colour in



Stepin Fetchit as Casper in 1938's *His Exciting Night* with Charles Ruggles (far left). *The Birth of a Nation* (left) was called "the most reprehensibly racist film in Hollywood history" by the *Washington Post*. Hattie McDaniel as Mammy with Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (above).



Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for her role in *Gone with the Wind* (far left). *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* actor Sidney Poitier (left) was the first black actor to win a Best Actor Oscar, for *Lilies of the Field* (1963). Sammy Davis Jr.'s marriage to Loray White only lasted a year (below).

**50 scandals  
that rocked old  
HOLLYWOOD**

the first half of the century was Stepin Fetchit. Though prolific, he played the same character, a befuddled and mumbling simpleton, in every film and black leaders criticised him for perpetuating a degrading stereotype.

The most garlanded black actor of the time was Hattie McDaniel. In 1940 she became the first African American to win an Academy Award, scooping the Best Supporting Actress gong for 1939's *Gone with the Wind*. Yet at that event, she was forced to sit at a segregated table. This wasn't the first indignity for McDaniel. At the film's premiere in Atlanta she was forbidden to attend, as the city's Loew's Grand Theater was a whites-only venue. The final indignity came after she died in 1952. McDaniel wanted to be buried in Hollywood Cemetery on Santa Monica Boulevard, the resting place of such titans as Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks. Only its owner refused due to its policy of segregation.

Hollywood's attitudes to race pre- and post-war saw some non-white actors hiding their ethnicity. Fredi Washington, Carol Channing and Merle Oberon are just three who kept their racial heritage a secret. Oberon pretended her Indian mother was her servant, while Channing, whose paternal grandmother was black, didn't

reveal her African American ancestry until she was in her 80s.

During the Thirties and Forties Hollywood was restricted in how it could address racial issues. The Motion Picture Production Code banned interracial romance on screen. However, Fox's 1949 drama *Pinky* got around the ban by casting a white actress, Jeanne Crain, as a light-skinned black woman who falls in love with a white doctor.

The anti-miscegenation clause was removed in the Code's 1956 revision, which gave filmmakers more freedom in covering race issues. But it's not as if a wave of open-hearted liberalism suddenly spread through Hollywood. In 1957, Sammy Davis Jr.'s affair with actress Kim Novak scandalised Tinseltown. At that time, interracial marriage was illegal in half of America's states, and a Gallup poll in 1958 showed that only four per cent of Americans approved of relationships between races. Columbia boss Harry Cohn believed the romance would kill Novak's career and threatened Davis. "They said they would break both of his legs, put out his other eye [Davis had lost his left eye in a car accident], and bury him in a hole if he didn't marry a black woman," Davis' friend Arthur Silber told the *Smithsonian* magazine. Davis married black singer Loray White shortly after.

The next decade, as the Civil Rights Act ended segregation, would see a more progressive Hollywood emerge. Sidney Poitier became one of the biggest stars of the Sixties and was the first black actor to win a Best Actor Oscar, while movies like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *In the Heat of the Night* (both 1967) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) all dealt with race issues in a much bolder manner.

Hollywood may like to pat itself on the back now for its liberalism, but it's wise to remember it wasn't always like that. Tinseltown, as much as any long-lasting institution, has a history that is often problematic. And with statistics that show that, between 2010 and 2020, 89 per cent of Oscar nominations were awarded to white creatives, it's clear that they still have some way to go.

