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How Denzel Washington was robbed

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

The man probably least surprised when pre-Oscar night favorite Denzel Washington did not grab the Oscar for his winning performance as boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter in the film Hurricane was Denzel Washington. I'm sure he reads the three Hollywood trade papers, the Daily Variety, Weekly Variety, and the Hollywood Reporter. And he knew from even the most cursory reading that his chance to become only the second African-American to win the top acting award in the 72 year history of the Academy Awards ceremony washed away months before the night of the awards. That was when DreamWorks, a creation of film director Steven Spielberg and his pals, made a decision to pour close to a \$1 million (known) into an ad, promotional and lobbying campaign to virtually buy an academy award for its film American Beauty and anyone involved in the making of the film. DreamWorks executives remembered how their film Saving Private Ryan lost the best picture award in 1999 to Miramax Studio's Shakespeare in Love. DreamWorks screamed that Miramax won the award because it dumped money into a last minute ad and promotional blitz for the film. DreamWorks was determined to rip the page from Miramax's text.

Even before a single movie patron had seen American Beauty, DreamWorks PR hirelings smoozed and stroked reviewers and critics to get them to gush over the film. It trotted out its top stars Kevin Spacey

and Annette Bening and director Sam Mendes for appearances on major talk shows to hype the film. It sent its writer Alan Ball to celebrity dinners and tributes to hob knob with academy voters. The strategy was to keep the film and its performers in the eye of as many of the more than 5,600 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science members that pick the Oscar winners as possible. The ploy worked. DreamWorks lavish cash spree tipped the scales in favor of the film and Spacey for best actor. But there were other heavy feet tipping the scales against Washington. Many film critics nipped the film to death for its alleged inaccuracies and glorification of Carter's life. The critics trash Hurricane campaign almost certainly chased some Academy votes away from Washington. The same critics barely uttered a peep about the inaccuracies in the film, Boys Don't Cry. A glaring omission was there was no mention that the reason that female Teena Brandon became transsexual Brandon Teena, on whose story the film is based, was because she was raped. But this didn't scare voters away from awarding the best actress award to Hillary Swank for portraying Teena. Another heavy foot on the scales against Washington was that of a group that called itself The Families of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter's victims. Presumably the group is made up of family members of the three men Carter was charged with murdering. Although the identities of these Carter haters remain unknown. Their mission was to raise as much hell as

possible about the film and Carter. A spokesman for the group claimed they were able to lobby more than a thousand academy members to snub the film (i.e. Washington). Whether true or not the fact that such a group existed if nowhere other than on paper probably convinced some academy members inclined to reward Washington with the award to change their minds.

Washington could find few black academy supporters to offset the backlash against Hurricane and frontlash for American Beauty and honor his towering performance. They are still mostly invisible in the voting ranks of academy members. Less than 200 of the academy voters are black. This does much to explain why in the decades that Hollywood has ladled out its top awards a grand total of six blacks, and that includes Washington for a best supporting actor award in 1989 and Sidney Poitier for best actor for his role as Homer Smith, the happy-go-lucky traveling laborer in Lilies of the Field in 1963, have won awards.

The machinations by the studios, critics, academy members at this year's academy awards ceremony gave lie to Hollywood's claim that the academy awards go purely for merit and performance. The robbing of Washington of the top award for Hurricane more than proves that it doesn't.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of the forthcoming, The Disappearance of Black Leadership (Middle Passage Press, Los Angeles, May 2000) Order Information: 323-298-0266. He is also director of the National Alliance for Positive Action. email: ehutchi344@aol.com

A challenge to the final four

BY JOE KLOCK
COLUMNIST

I am bathroom sick of the slime-sliding that has characterized the Year 2000 presidential campaign thus far - and there's a growing body of evidence that most Americans feel the same.

Contrary to the disclaimers of rock-solid (and rock-headed) partisans in both major parties, there is enough guilt to stain the hands of all four front-runners, so I'm not taking sides. (Alan Keyes has remained relatively clean, but unless he runs the political equivalent of a two-minute mile between here and the finish line, he is no more a contender for nomination than Big Bird.)

Arguably, this has been the dirtiest Primary season of many decades and it's starting to look like the two finalists will be those who flung the dung that hung most visibly on their opponents. Spinning, finger-pointing and tap-dancing being the refined arts that they have become, supporters of all four finalists in this marathon of muck describe the negative tactics of their own guys as "relevant facts," while treating those of their opponents as being sins that cry to heaven for vengeance.

If the present unruly rules of engagement continue, we of the unwashed masses will be exposed mostly to biographical profiles of the winning candidates worthy of being cover stories in the National Enquirer. Meanwhile, the issues that are of lasting importance to the nation will either remain in the shadows of obscurity or be spoon-fed to the public as sound bites and slick slogans.

All the candidates have piously and persistently proclaimed their opposition to negative campaigning, while pleading that it is a necessary evil when the "other guy" throws the first punch. What they say less frequently is that, reprehensible though they be, negative strategies bring positive results to the polling place - and if flow blows aren't returned in kind (or unkind), he who turns the other cheek loses his political ass. More's the pity, but, as Jimmy Durante was fond of saying, "Dat's the sitchyayshun dat prevails." More insidious than direct attacks by

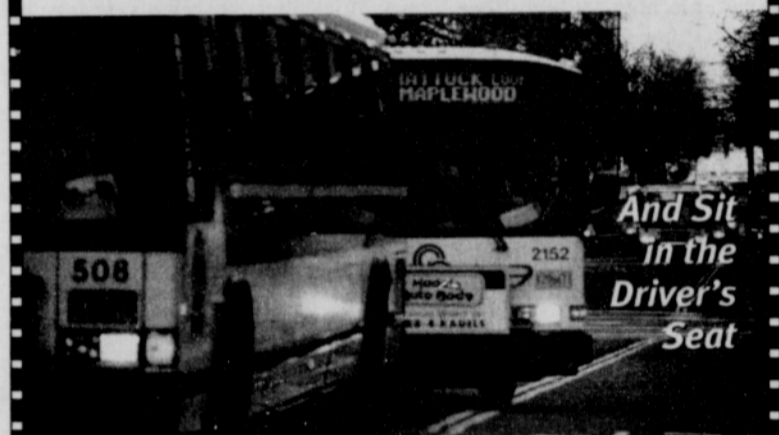
one candidate on another is the dirty work done by surrogates, who can be disowned and/or described as loose cannons that can't be controlled or silenced - the irreverent Reverend Pat Robertson being the most recent of many examples of that sordid species. Perhaps the foulest foul is the so-called "push poll," wherein a computerized phone call poses a series of innocuous questions, then slips in a vicious slam at the opposing candidate which is always at least a half-truth and often a flat-out lie. Here again, it's easy for the other candidate to deny either knowledge or endorsement of the sleazy maneuver. It does, though, hit the mark with devastating effectiveness, so it is rapidly becoming as much a part of our political picture as kissing babies and putting on funny hats.

Do I have a solution to this problem? Silly question! (Breathes there a columnist with soul so dead who never to himself has said "here's EXACTLY what can be done!") Here's the plan: Messrs. Bradley, Bush, Gore and McCain should immediately subscribe to this pledge: "Thereby promise to avoid all personal attacks on my opponent's character and personal life and, regardless of the source, will repudiate the message and denounce the messenger whenever others engage in such tactics. In such cases, I will demand that these tactics be withdrawn and retracted immediately. I deny in advance any knowledge of or support for negative campaigning in any form by me or members of my support team. My response to personal attacks on me will be limited to setting the record straight. I will devote all of my time, energy and resources to laying out my plan for America's future." Toward that end, I have submitted the above text to the "Final Four" and asked them if they would be willing to join the other three in subscribing to it. Take this to the bank: the only thing that politicians fear is an electorate that is both informed AND aroused. Some of the early surprises in primary voting suggest that both dynamics are alive and well on the American scene. Having challenged the "Quarrelsome Quartet" to cut the crap and get down to business, I now challenge YOU, gentle reader, to similarly chide them.

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