

Focus

OSCAR MOMENTS



Actress Queen Latifah celebrates her win as part of the ensemble cast of "Chicago" at the Screen Actors Guild awards in Los Angeles on March 9. (AP photo)

Minority Presence Low at Oscars

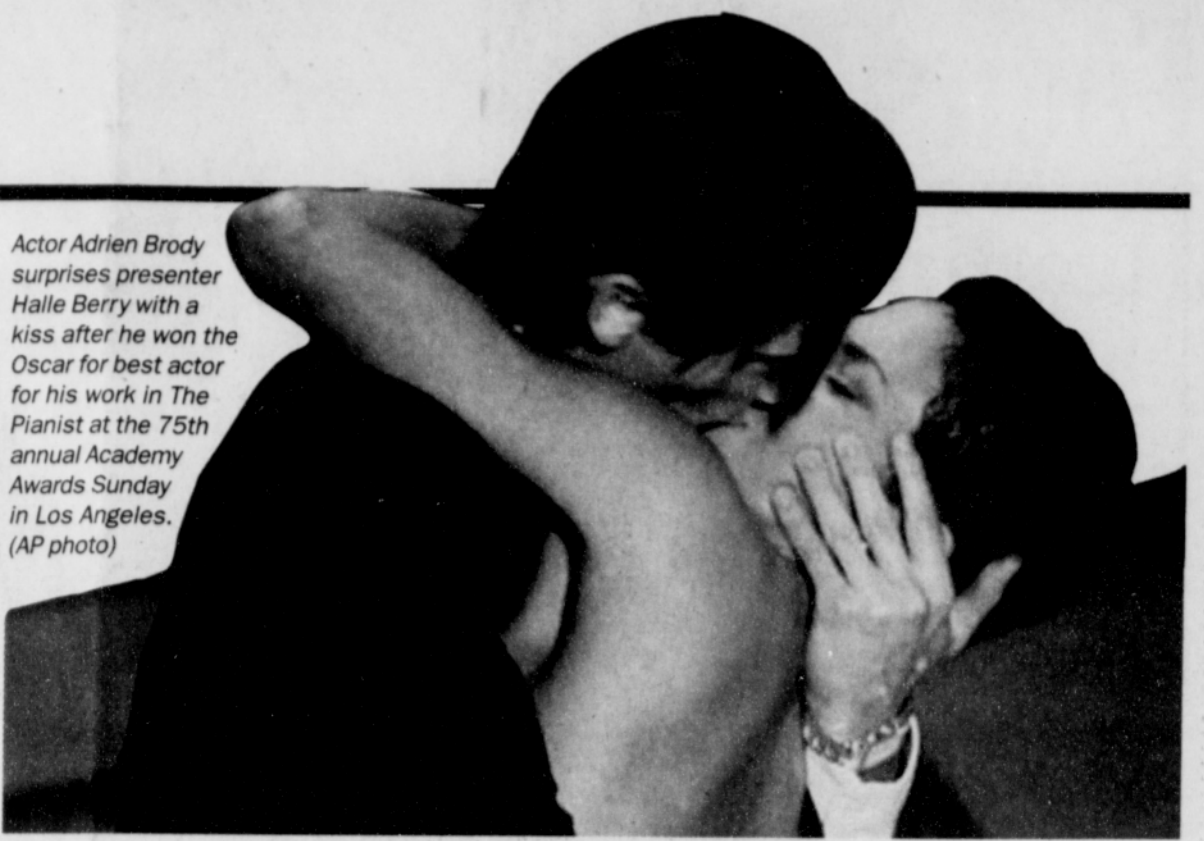
(AP) — A year after two black nominees won the lead-acting prizes for the first time, white performers swept in the best actor categories at Sunday's Academy Awards.

Just two minority nominees - Mexico native Salma Hayek for best actress in "Frida" and black performer Queen Latifah for supporting actress in "Chicago" - were considered serious contenders against the white front-runners (Nicole Kidman of "The Hours" and Renee Zellweger of "Chicago" for lead actress, and Catherine Zeta-Jones of "Chicago" for supporting actress).

Yet some find it encouraging that at least a couple nonwhite actors managed to score nominations from an academy whose early years were virtually devoid of minority membership and which even in the past decade has had years without a single nonwhite acting nominee.

"I try to look at it as, last year was a big year and that meant a lot, and it may take a few years before we really see the fruits of what happened last year. It doesn't happen overnight," said Halle Berry,

Actor Adrien Brody surprises presenter Halle Berry with a kiss after he won the Oscar for best actor for his work in *The Pianist* at the 75th annual Academy Awards Sunday in Los Angeles. (AP photo)



who won the best-actress Oscar last year for "Monster's Ball."

Last year, Denzel Washington won the best-actor prize for "Training Day," and Will Smith of "Ali" was also nominated in that category.

The only other time three blacks were nominated in the lead categories was 1972. Paul Winfield was up for best actor for "Sounder," and Cicely Tyson

You can (count) minority actors on your fingers without taking your shoes off.

—three-time Oscar nominee Morgan Freeman

of "Sounder" and Diana Ross of "Lady Sings the Blues" competed for best actress. All three lost.

Advocates of greater diversity in film were thrilled over Berry and Washington's wins, considering only six black actors - or 2.2 percent of the 278 winners - had received acting Oscars at the previ-

ous 73 Oscar shows.

Critics complain that the 5,800-member academy remains disproportionately white. Others say the real problem is Hollywood at large, which offers too few Oscar-caliber films and roles for minorities.

"You can (count) minority actors on your fingers without taking your shoes off," said three-time Oscar nominee Morgan Freeman. "So how can you expect to have one or two (minority nominees) in every mix? You just can't."

Advocates say more minorities must follow the lead of Washington, whose star power helped smooth the way for his directing debut, last year's "Antwone Fisher," based on the true story of a troubled black sailor.

"Until we get our own people writing screenplays for ourselves and getting money to produce our own films, it'll just be, 'If there happens to be a part they want to give us, fine,'" said Mayme Agnew Clayton, founder of the African-American Cinema Society. "Until then, we're just kind of at the mercy of Hollywood."

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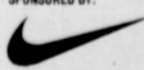
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Will Smith decided not to make his fourth appearance as an Oscar presenter.

War Keeps Smith From Oscars

(AP) — Will Smith skipped the Academy Awards in light of the U.S.-led assault on Iraq.

The "Men in Black" star, was scheduled to be a presenter at Sunday's Oscars. His publicist, Stan Rosenfield, said he didn't intend the withdrawal as a protest over the military action.

"Not in any way, shape or

form," Rosenfield said. "There's no agenda, there's no speeches. He just did not feel personally comfortable in going because of the world situation."

A best-actor nominee a year ago for "Ali," Smith, 34, would have been making his fourth appearance as a presenter at the Oscars.

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