White Privilege

EDITORIAL
Denzel
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Denzel Washington is the greatest actor to grace the silver screen. His portrayal of Malcolm X was a tour de force that earned him a place at the top of the highest echelon of motion picture actors. Similarly, his portrayal of the wrongfully imprisoned Hurricane Carter was a magnificent piece of work that displayed his full range as an actor. He should have won academy awards for both films. But he didn’t.

Now, he is again nominated for the Best Actor Oscar for his work in Training Day. Although his portrayal of a corrupt narcotics police officer was commendable, the film itself was trash. And it trashed Black and Brown people.

Set in Los Angeles, viewers took a tour of South Central Los Angeles, a predominantly African American community, and East Los Angeles, a predominantly Latino area.

I live in South Central Los Angeles and regularly visit sections of East Los Angeles. They are communities of working families that have more than their fair share of homelessness and other signifiers of the denial of full participation in the city’s and America’s educational, employment and economic opportunities. But the film’s portrayal of these areas was full of distorted stereotypes, urban pathos, loose women, thuggish men, and communities engaged in tangles of pathology.

It is the same old story: a “Black” film made by White people. And it is the White hero who faces repeated death, conquers seemingly impossible odds, and emerges victorious over the hapless gangsters, drug dealers (and rogue cops) who live fictionalized lives in what, in reality, are decent communities.

Denzel demonstrated his tremendous talents as an actor. But I hope that he has second thoughts about appearing in a film that catered to White fears and ambitions. Their fears of communities of color—of men of color—and their ambition to put the evil doers in their place.

So while we may applaud Denzel Washington, he loses a bit of his luster by succumbing to participating in a film that degrades his people and others oppressed by centuries of systematic discrimination.

When he wins the Oscar for this portrayal of a morally bankrupt detective, we wonder why he didn’t win one for portraying honorable men, and we know that millions of Americans will march through the turnstiles and continue their mis-education about the life circumstances of men and women of color. And they will be reinforced in both their fears and their ambitions.