

African-Americans score big in Oscar nominations

By Kevin Herrera

Special to Sentinel-Voice

LOS ANGELES (NNPA) — Ever since the Academy Award nominations were unveiled last week, a record five nods for actors of African descent have been cause for celebration in Black Hollywood circles, especially among those who have long struggled to prod the film industry into increased recognition for performers of color, and to place more non-Whites in front of and behind the camera.

Nominated were Jamie Foxx, recipient of a best actor nomination for "Ray" and a supporting nod for "Collateral"; Don Cheadle, nominated as best actor for "Hotel Rwanda"; "Rwanda" co-star Sophie Okonedo, up for best supporting actress; and Morgan Freeman, best supporting actor nominee for "Million Dollar Baby." Up for best actress is the young Colombian actress Catalina Sandino Moreno, star of the acclaimed "Maria Full of Grace" and one of the few Latinos ever recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Advocates of film industry diversity applauded the nominations, hoping aloud that they signal a shift in Hollywood's insular, often homogenous atmosphere. "We are very excited and proud not only of the African-American community, but the entire creative community as well," said Vicangelo Bulluck, executive director of the NAACP Hollywood Bureau and executive producer of the NAACP Image Awards.

"I'm just so happy and thrilled," said Roz Stevenson, a publicist specializing in films starring people of color,

including "Ray," which she helped promote and is now up for best picture. "I knew it was Oscar worthy ... but [director Taylor Hackford and company] had a hard time bringing it to the screen. I'm just so excited for him and Ray Charles Jr. because they stuck with it for 15 years. People felt that the young film-going audience didn't know who Ray Charles was or couldn't relate to such a film, so they turned them down. This shows that a good story goes a long way."

Lee Bailey, publisher of the Electronic Urban Report and the host and producer of "RadioScope," said he was "pleasantly surprised" by the nominations. "I am in agreement with the nominations," he said. "I think it is noteworthy that the Academy is giving credit and props to African-American actors for legitimately great performances. Hollywood is finally living in a modern era. Hollywood is in sync with modern times. They are realizing that African-Americans are a legitimate part of the marketplace as consumers and certainly as actors. We cannot be denied."

Those nominated agree. "Greater roles are being created for us and you have to thank people like Denzel [Washington], Sidney Poitier and Halle Berry, who are great ambassadors," Foxx, who portrayed the legendary musician Ray Charles in "Ray" and a kidnapped cabbie in "Collateral," told *USA Today*.

In the same publication, Freeman, who earned his fourth Oscar nomination for his role as an ex-boxer in Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby," said: "It's evidence of what's going on in

Hollywood. If you get the work, then you'll get recognized."

However, even as they rejoiced, other industry observers said in interviews that now is not the time to grow complacent. On the contrary, with more attention being placed on the talents of minorities in film, people of color should be aggressively lobbying studio executives who are always concerned about the bottom line, they said.

By showing studio heads that films featuring multiple ethnicities and cultures cannot only be well received by critics, but also by the ticket-buying public, studios just might be more inclined to fund them. Instead of seeing these films as a risk financially, studios may start to view them as potential blockbusters or award recipients, industry observers said. After decades of being practically excluded from the boardroom, it's time to make an aggressive push.

"Right now you have to strike when the iron is hot," said Wilson Morales, editor of BlackFilms.com. "It's like an [actors] prior to the release of Oscar nominations. If [they] are being talked about, that's a big boost to their career. They should be telling their agents to get them as many roles as possible while there is still an interest, while everyone is talking. These nominations provide a window of opportunity, but that window will not be open for long. People need to start putting forth good material and right now, I don't see anything on the horizon."

An Oscar nomination, even an Oscar win, does not necessarily translate into

(See Oscars, Page 8)

Nas composes music at Morehouse

ATLANTA (AP) — Students enrolled in Morehouse College's jazz-improv class had Nas in their area.

The 31-year-old rapper and his father, jazz trumpeter Olu Dara, composed an original piece of music with the students as part of mtvU's "Stand In."

The show features politicians and entertainers working as surprise substitute professors at college campuses.

Perhaps the hardest part of arranging the event was keeping it secret.

The 14 members of the media and MTV crew were to pretend, if pressed, that they were observing the class for Morehouse's communications office.

About 10 minutes into the class, Professor Melvin Jones told the nine male students that they had a substitute teacher, as Nas and Dara entered with another camera crew.

Wearing a green hoodie, sunglasses and camouflage Atlanta Braves cap, Nas stood behind the teacher's podium and discussed how he became interested in music at an early age.

His father made him listen to music that ranged from John Coltrane to Fela Kuti to New Edition, he said.

The rapper said he was envious of the students.

"I wish I'd learned more about playing and reading," he said. "I'd be way more ahead in my music today."

The show aired Feb. 1 on mtvU, which is available only on college campuses. Past participants on "Stand In" have included Sen. John Kerry, who taught an American foreign policy class at the University of New Hampshire, and Marilyn Manson, who taught an art and society class at Temple University.

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