

Northwestern reacts to lack of diversity in Oscar nominations

By BENJAMIN DIN, Northwestern University

“Selma” is rated 99 percent and certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes, but it wasn’t fresh enough for a Best Director or Best Actor nomination at the Academy Awards.

Each year, the academy recognizes select groups of people for achievement in the film industry. This year, two groups were notably absent: actors of color and female directors. The lack of representation in this year’s list of nominees comes on the heels of leaked emails containing racially insensitive remarks by Sony Pictures Entertainment co-Chairman Amy Pascal and producer Scott Rudin.

Despite “Selma” receiving a Best Picture nomination, the director, Ava DuVernay, and lead actor, David Oyelowo, were left off the list. The critically acclaimed historical drama is based on the 1965 black voting rights marches, and DuVernay would have been the first African-American female to be nominated for best director.

The lack of recognition was not surprising for those familiar with the industry.

“You know, we’re used to it,” said Aziza Ngozi (Communication '08), an assistant editor on theatrical and television projects. “We’re really used to it.”

In 2013 the Best Picture and Best Supporting Actress Oscars went to “12 Years A Slave” and Lupita Nyong’o, respectively. Those wins make the lack of nominations for DuVernay and Oyelowo this year all the more surprising.

“They’ve proven that they can support diverse stories, but they’re not going to make a habit of it,” said Communication freshman Maria Silva-Inclan.

However, the surprise dissipates once people understand the composition of the academy, said Becky Smith, an Emmy-nominated director and professor of film, television and digital media at the University of California Los Angeles, in an email interview. A Los Angeles Times study from 2012 revealed academy members were nearly 94 percent Caucasian and 77 percent male.

Smith, who has directed two feature films, is confused by the stigma toward female directors. Despite stereotypes of women being unable to handle money or be successful leaders, many women have successfully directed theatrical and television projects.

“I have never cried on a set or become confused or broken down under the pressure,” she said in an email. “So this ‘fear’ of women directing is a mystery to me.”

Although disappointing, the lack of recognition can be beneficial, especially in the case of “Selma,” radio, television and film Prof. Ariel Rogers said.

“The fact that it’s not gotten recognition is bringing recognition to an absence that has been around for a long time,” Rogers said.

There is keen interest in the RTVF department to address these issues, Rogers said. She believes her role as a teacher is to raise awareness about the lack of representation in the industry. By doing so, she hopes to build up the pressure needed to make a difference.

“You need to recognize that there’s an issue first in order to provoke change,” she said.

These issues ultimately point to a much larger societal problem, Ngozi said. Despite there being people of color all over the world, several films featuring actors of color do not get distributed to foreign markets, she said. She attributes this to the fact that audiences of color deal with self-hatred and would rather “see people who are white rather than people who are like themselves.” Addressing these problems can incite change within the industry.

“There needs to be more campaigns of people loving themselves ... instead of everyone trying to change themselves and be somebody they’re not,” Ngozi said.

Despite the industry’s problems, diversity is attainable, Smith said. It is not an overnight process, but it is an ongoing one.

“Diversity will only come with diverse people finding their way into the industry,” Smith said in an email interview. “It’s happening, but it’s happening slowly because it’s such a very, very hard institution and culture to break into.”