When Hollywood Gets it Right

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Diversity, and the lack thereof, has been an issue in the film industry since its inception. And in those rare occasions when actors of color were hired, most were forced to play roles that perpetuated the stereotypical images of savage Indians, subservient Asians and intellectually challenged Black folks from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967). These images informed the psyches of the less enlightened among us and still do in some pockets of the country.

It was essentially The Death of a Nation.

Yet, even though there have been precious few depictions of Black journalists in feature films, in some ways Hollywood's portrayals of beleaguered and battered journalists of color were spot on. Two films, *Livin' Large!* (1991) and *Heat Wave* (1990) provide perfect depictions of the plight of some Black journalists. They serve as precautionary tales for those pursuing real life careers in the Fourth Estate.

Despite coming from two different genres–comedy and drama–and receiving tepid reviews from critics, these films accurately presented scenarios that many young and veteran journalists have experienced, and are experiencing, in this current climate of division and social injustice. In *Livin' Large!*, director Michael Schultz's 1991 MGM satirical comedy about a delivery driver with aspirations to become a TV anchorman, we see the protagonist essentially selling his soul to realize his dreams.

The protagonist, Dexter Jackson (T.C. Carson), is a graduate of the Ajax School of Broadcasting. One day while delivering dry cleaning he stumbles upon a hostage situation in which his idol, Clifford Worthy (Bernie McInerney), a white-washed Black reporter, and others are shot by a disgruntled Boy Scout leader. Dexter grabs the fallen reporter's mic and begins reporting from the scene, convincing the scout leader not to commit suicide on live TV.

Shortly after this improbable series of events, Kate (Blanche Baker), the white executive producer of a local affiliate in Atlanta, offers Jackson a job covering the Black community. Thus begins Jackson's downward spiritual and professional spiral. In a classic example of life imitating art, Jackson's efforts to put a positive spin on his stories by bypassing the stereotype of interviewing buffoons and suspected criminals and offering up more substantive content, are subsequently sensationalized by producers to improve ratings. This is a common dilemma for young reporters of color. Do they perpetuate the stereotype to keep their job? Or do they have the courage of their convictions once realizing that all those dangling carrots are toxic and not the tasty treats they once thought they were.

It's a trap.

Often, when you're the first and only, you don't want to rock the boat. Eventually, however, Jackson could no longer be the Oreo his bosses wanted him to be. His transformation from street smart dude with dreadlocks to a short afro and designer suits has even his closest friends calling him "an Uncle Tom bastard."

Ironically, that pressure to appease his bosses to advance his career is also what caused the premature imploding of Janet Cooke's once promising career at *The Washington Post*, and Jayson Blair's at *The New York Times*. Both were caught fabricating stories, perhaps because they felt their best efforts weren't good enough in those uber competitive environments. Perhaps

they both should have watched *Livin' Large!* and *Heat Wave* before they made that left turn down Career Suicide Boulevard.

"There are still a lot of Dexters around," Schultz said. "It's hard not to make compromises and everyone is always afraid about losing their job—let alone climbing up the success ladder. So, there are people who don't make those choices and become very successful because they are authentic, but that's recent…A lot of young people coming up in my industry, your industry or business—if they don't have strong fundamentals and ethical training in their education, it's very easy to become those Dexters. Until there's a whole reckoning on both sides with the whole racial construct that has built this nation, there won't be any changes because there are blind spots."

Translation: White filmmakers don't often present Black characters in full tapestry and subsequently these images inform and perpetuate the stereotypes.

The Heat is On

Conversely, *Heat Wave* was inspired by actual events—the 1965 Watts riots. Directed by Kevin Hooks, this 1990 film, presented on TNT, tells that story through the eyes of Bob Richardson (Blair Underwood), a Watts resident who worked in the mailroom of *The Los Angeles Times*. Although Richardson took a few journalism classes at a local community college, he, like Dexter Jackson, was essentially untrained. The Watts uprisings were ignited when some white LAPD officers stopped a group of young Black men on suspicion of DUI.

DWB (Driving While Black) as it is commonly called today, was extremely triggering in the '60s, inarguably one of the most turbulent decades in American history. There were the successive assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers,

Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X, Civil Rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The era was also dominated by the Vietnam War and the increasing tensions between the Black community and law enforcement.

Civil Rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer once said during a speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention that she was "sick and tired of being sick and tired." That mantra had been widely embraced in Watts, a city that had become a hot spot for police harassment. Up until the riots, however, the media had paid little attention to what was going on there and why.

Clarence Page, a long-time columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, provided insight as to why mainstream media outlets were basically ignoring the growing racial tensions in some of America's largest cities in a column acknowledging the 50th anniversary of the Watts uprising in 2015. He shared his perspective on that time during a recent interview from his Washington, D.C. home.

"The riots (Aug. 11, 1965) weren't the first, but they were the first that really grabbed everybody's attention," Page said. "Watts changed the perceptions of white folks and mainstream media's perceptions of race relations changed. Watts kind of triggered this whole line of disasters that occurred at that time."

The riots also changed the complexion of the *LA Times* newsroom.

One of the things you notice about the first scene in *Heat Wave* in the *LA Times* newsroom is that it's all white men in white shirts. The juxtaposition between that world and Watts feels rather authentic on celluloid. Hooks does a good job of capturing the essence and mindset of the haves and the have nots.

While some media outlets wrote Watts off as just another American ghetto, it was much more than that. For Black folks in the '60s, Watts was a suburban oasis where they could own homes and run their own businesses. But like many predominantly Black and Brown cities in the '60s, residents had grown weary of the seemingly constant harassment by white policemen. So, when the DUI incident erupted, Richardson was convinced that he was the only person at the *Times* who could truthfully tell the story of what was going on in his neighborhood.

That's when he parked his cart and knocked on the door of one of the glass offices.

"There was a time in the mid-'60s when journalists of color were being hired left and right, and a lot of women were finally being promoted," Page said. "Not everyone survived."

While the film's writer Michael Lazarou leads us to believe that Richardson would be a survivor, there were hints early on that he might not realize his dream of becoming a reporter for his hometown news rag. After explaining to *Times* metro editor Bill Thomas (Michael Stratharin) and reporter/editor Art Berman (Alan Arkin) that he would be the perfect dude to cover the story because it would be easy for him to infiltrate the affected areas, Thomas tells him, "Listen, kid, just because you're a Negro does not make you a reporter. I need a journalist, not an opportunist. I cannot use you."

Richardson replies, "You cannot use me? I just saved two of your white reporters' asses."

And that's how the messenger dude became the first Black reporter trainee—and a target.

Every former *LA Times* reporter I interviewed sang the same tune. Richardson got played. They used him until they had no more use for him. Richardson's reports helped shape the *Times*' Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the uprisings, yet he was dismissed after 10 months. After leaving the paper Richardson apparently struggled with alcoholism, was arrested for burglary and spent time living on LA's Skid Row.

This wasn't exactly a dream deferred, it was simply a dream destroyed.

Bill Drummond, who started as a reporter at the *Times* in 1967, admitted that there were several stories floating around about the rise and fall of Bob Richardson. Drummond, now a professor at UC-Berkeley, shared what he perceived to be one of the more credible stories told to him by someone who actually worked with Richardson.

"I'll tell you what I know, which is also gossip, but at least it's gossip from the period when Richardson was still alive," said Drummond. "The Watts riots caught everyone unaware, and they got really fearful about sending white reporters down there because they thought somebody would hurt them. I'm not exactly sure how the contact got made. I don't know if it was initiated by Richardson or somebody that knew him said, 'Hey, there's this guy in the mailroom that might be valuable'…But anyway, they brought Bob Richardson up from his job as a mailer and said you don't have to write anything but we want you to kind of go out and blend in with the community, get behind the police lines and tell us what's really going on."

Richardson wasn't the only one hired during that tumultuous era. Some were trained, some were not. The latter, like Richardson, paid the price for their inexperience.

In a really telling statement, Richardson, in recalling his tenure at the *Times*, once said that he was "incapable of doing anything in-depth. I really wasn't trained for that. I was scared to death every night." (Solomon & Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 14 2015). While his displeasure is glossed over a bit in the film, it is clear that Richardson realized he was marginally talented. He essentially was a gofer. Instead of getting coffee, he collected quotes for other writers to include in their coverage.

There are some parallels between Richardson and Joe Boyce, the first Black senior editor at *The Wall Street Journal*. Boyce, too, was one of the "untrained" hires, but he was fearless and

did survive. Prior to embarking on a journalism career, Boyce was a Chicago police officer patrolling the Federal Building when he was literally approached by a *Tribune* reporter who told him that they were looking for a "colored reporter."

While Boyce admitted that "half the people in the newsroom were just waiting for me to screw up," unlike Richardson Boyce survived his trial by fire by using his wits to defy the odds and essentially refusing to be just the Black guy. That's how the intern who started in the neighborhood news section became the first Black reporter for the city edition in 1966.

"I joined the *Chicago Tribune* the year after the Watts riots," Boyce said from his home in Atlanta. "I think I was hired because they thought I was articulate and 'teachable.' But the real reason that I and others of color were offered jobs in mainstream media was not because, at least in my case, we were smarter, more articulate or malleable, but because the country was in the midst of profound social turmoil. There were really no reporters to fully tell the stories of the 20th century. It opened the doors for those of color who had trained for the profession but had up to then been rebuffed.

"Those like myself, who were intellectually curious and even some who liked being in the spotlight but had no real interest in the genre [were offered jobs]. It took some time but eventually the group was culled until most of us remaining were there because of what we thought we could offer journalism and society and the impact it had on us personally."

It's clear in the film that the times and *The Times* had a huge impact on Richardson. There's a scene in which he's on a payphone in the midst of all the violent chaos around him and he feels the enormity of the situation he's in. You can see it in his eyes. And even though he wasn't a "real" journalist, he apparently was a great storyteller. But according to Gayle Pollard-

Terry, who became the *Times*' first Black editorial writer in the '90s, Richardson's stories were still told through the lens of white rewrite men.

"He never really had ownership of his own work," she said.

Boyce did his share of calling in stories, too.

"Our situations were kind of similar because there was a Puerto Rican riot going on in Chicago around the same time," Boyce said. "And even though I was still in the neighborhood news, the managing editor came up to me and asked if I would go out there and cover it because they didn't have anybody who looked like a Puerto Rican who could speak Spanish. I went out there and did it at night."

He wouldn't, however, go out and cover the Black neighborhoods.

"I told them I wasn't going to do it," Boyce said. "Did the Black neighborhood need coverage? Absolutely. Did they need fair coverage? Yes. But remember, I was the first person there and if I said I wanted to cover the Black neighborhood they would give me a desk in a corner somewhere and say, 'That's our Black reporter, he covers the Black neighborhood. He's probably the best sourced reporter here' – and that's where I would have stayed forever.

"It wasn't so much about me, it was about the Black people who would be coming after me," Boyce added. "I knew I would do a good job but if I started out doing that, they would have been shuttled down that same road. Once I proved myself at the paper, I covered Black stories, but the ones I wanted to."

Perhaps someone will write a screenplay comparing and contrasting the lives of both Boyce and Richardson. Collectively, their back stories are truly riveting and compelling. One succeeded despite the odds, and it appears that the other one was destined for that less than

idyllic Hollywood ending, even though he likely could have made it had someone taken the time to mentor him.

Richardson, who died at 59 in 2020, needs his own story.

"I sat across the table from Bob probably close to a year on the regular," said Lazarou, who admitted he never set out to tell the story of what it was like to be a Black journalist; rather he chose to tell the story of the Watts uprisings through Richardson's eyes.

"It took me two years to find him. He had a really interesting life. He had been on the streets for a long time. It was really kind of a lucky break that enabled me to find him. I had spoken to Art Berman and Jack Jones at *The Los Angeles Times* and months after I had spoken with Jones I called back because I had a follow-up question on my *Heat Wave* research. I happened to mention, 'If I could only find Bob.'"

As it turned out Jones had recently spoken with Richardson and reluctantly gave Lazarou the former reporter's contact information.

"I felt like the only way I could tell that story was through Bob," Lazarou said. "People had been trying to tell that story for years and this was the only way I could find a way in. I think that Blair actually did a very nice job of capturing Bob at that point in his life. He had boundless curiosity. He was a very bright guy."

Lynell George, an award-winning journalist and author who started her career at the *LA Times* in 1993 as an arts and culture writer, agreed with Lazarou's assessment of Richardson.

"I saw the film, but it has been so long that I don't remember much of the fine details or the actor's portrayal," George said. "I did meet Richardson in person when I did a story for the *LA Times* Syndicate before I was on staff at the paper. I remember him being quiet. Serious. And definitely affected by what happened to him in '65. He told his story with great care and still

with a shade of frustration. This was not just a big chance. He knew that he was being used. He still hadn't gotten over what he'd been asked to do and the thicket he had wandered into."

While the filmmakers did dramatize some of the events surrounding the riots, the film would have been much better had we seen Richardson's battles with his inner demons. Richardson's widow, however, was grateful that it did get most of her husband's story right.

"The movie was fairly factual but there were some variances," Alice Richardson told the *LA Times*. "His work for the time during the Watts riot was the pivotal point in his life. He was at the right place at the right time, and he was the right color. But mainly, he had the talent to write and observe."

Back to the Future

In some ways, today's young journalists are indebted to both Dexter Jackson and Bob Richardson. They took the proverbial hits so that journalists like Lynell George, Wesley Lowry, Kevin Merida, Gwen Ifill, Dorothy Gilliam, Isabel Wilkerson, Gayle Pollard-Terry, Leonard Pitts Jr., Clarence Page, Janet Clayton, Les Payne, Chuck Stone, Bob Maynard, Nancy Hicks Maynard and countless others were able to make small cracks in the plexiglass ceilings above their collective heads.

Justin Pye, an adjunct instructor at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, first saw *Livin' Large!* about five years ago. He had planned to show the film to his USC students and then decided not to.

"I didn't want Dexter Jackson to be the first example of a Black journalist on film that they saw," Pye said.

Pye, however, was inspired by Jackson's journey.

"I hadn't seen anything like it. I was kind of taken aback with the parallels between the two of us—especially since I was someone who wanted to be on air when I was younger," said Pye, who like Jackson has dreadlocks. "Seeing the main character's struggles with the establishment from the beginning felt like a mirror.

"And, oh yeah, what they made him do to his hair. I can definitely identify with that!"

Dexter had to cut his locs. Pye kept his but still had to deal with the side-eyed stares of bosses who wished he would adopt a more "mainstream" look.

Another common thread between Dexter and Pye was having to deal with the Big Cs—compromise and code-switching. The latter is the art of speaking in your normal ethnic dialect when you are talking to people who look like you, and then switching to your Queen's English TV voice when addressing folks from the dominant culture. It's something he saw veteran journalists do when he was an intern at an Atlanta TV station.

"Yeah, it's crazy that the character worked at a [sic] Atlanta TV station like me," Pye said. "There were situations where you felt like you weren't enough because of where you came from. You had to sometimes compromise how you naturally talked and dressed. I do feel like we've made some strides. For example, you'll see reporters and anchors with natural hair, with braids and things like that. You would not have seen that even 10 years ago. But on the whole, we know that we still have to tow a line and that still rings true.

"Everything we see in television and film is sensationalized but the concepts are based in our actual experience. I don't see that going away."

For Pye, it's sometimes just about accepting your own perceived fate as a Black journalist in America.

"So many people want to go to a place where they feel as though they are being seen—that their voice is being heard and that it is relevant," Pye said. "That's our story. For me, personally, it was just like I will never be what I thought I wanted to be when I was a kid because it's not possible in that way. If I wanted to do that, I would have to create my own space or go to a place that was specifically made for voices like mine."

Pye's point illustrates another parallel among Dexter Jackson, Bob Richardson and today's journalists of color, all of whom wanted to tell good stories then and now to elevate their communities and respective ethnicities. But that's hard to do when others are controlling the narratives. Richardson once wrote that the irony of getting his big break reporting on the misfortune of the Black community was not lost on him. Seeing his people involved in violent confrontations with the police was not something he could fully celebrate—especially when some of his friends and neighbors took exception to the headline written for Richardson's first published piece, "'Get Whitey,' Scream Blood-Hungry Mobs "(Richarson, *LA Times*, Aug, 1965).

Like Lazarou, Schultz had no intention of making a movie about a Black journalist. It just happened that the film's writer, William Mosely-Payne, made the protagonist a journalist.

"It wasn't really pointed at journalism. He just happened to be a journalist, but I had a broader message in mind. It was more about a dig at a Black person—male or female—who makes those kinds of compromises and gets X result. I think the original script was more pointed at Michael Jackson. I didn't want to make it about Michael Jackson, but it really was a cautionary tale," said Schultz, whose feature film credits include *Cooley High*, *Car Wash* and *The Last Dragon*.

Some critics complained that *Livin' Large!* was "a minstrel show," but Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* called it "one of the best pop comedies of the season." *The Chicago Sun Times* wrote that it had the "same funky, loose spontaneity of *Car Wash* while displaying a surprising knack for precise comic timing"; and Arnold White, a contributor for *Emerge*, a Black lifestyle magazine, wrote, "It took a Black Hollywood veteran to make the one movie that analyzed the ethical paradox in Black media. [Schultz's effort] poked a hole in the illusion of Black success preferred by today's fashionable young purveyors of stereotype. The film was attacked or ignored by Black journalists wincing from its well-aimed barbs."

In response to the critics, Schultz said, "I see film as a real opportunity to examine the human condition. No matter where the technology goes in the future, the basics don't change. Storytelling is a primitive tribal function. The elders sat around the fires and told these stories as a way to pass on the dos and the don'ts. That will never change."

The Times and the Times Are Changing

In the ensuing years since the Richardson era at the *LA Times* in *Heat Wave*, and Dexter Jackson's rude awakening at a fictional Atlanta TV station in *Livin' Large,* we've not seen characters *who* experienced the crisis of consciousness that Dexter Jackson and Bob Richardson did. In one pivotal scene in *Livin' Large!* Jackson's female boss says to him, "When I brought you on to cover your side of town I wanted stories for a broad audience."

Dexter responds, "In other words, white people."

Boss lady then tells him to take a good look around. "It's a white man's world and without ratings we'd both be out the door."

For Jackson, the door opened wider when he realized the damage he had done.

For Richardson the door closed once the riots ended.

"They were really, really beholden to Bob Richardson because he kind of gave them credibility," Drummond said of his former employers. "They gave him a desk and he sat in the newsroom…The problem was the guy was not a journalist. Without the turmoil in the streets there was nothing for him to do."

Adds George, "Yes, that was true for Bob. They let him go right into the heat of things without any training. Thirty years later as *LA Times* reporter Andrea Ford famously said in a meeting during the 1992 unrest (following the Rodney King beating and subsequent acquittal of the officers who attacked him), Black reporters were being used as 'cannon fodder.' And she was furious about this. I haven't seen *Livin' Large!* in a long time but this cycle of young or untrained reporters of color who are hired to boost numbers and then left to struggle through the system is something that some of us have witnessed."

The Evolution Has Been Televised—Somewhat

Many of the journalists interviewed for this piece are either retired, working in academia or writing books and essays like George. None of them, however, could recall a feature film with Black actors cast as journalists that inspired their career paths.

"There just weren't any," said George.

"We were quite invisible at that time," added Page. "We would be in the background all of the time. I'd be watching *Lou Grant* and I'd be wondering about the Black reporters in the background. I wanted to know what their stories were."

Today, there are several Black journalist characters who have emerged from the wallpaper. Apple TV's *The Morning Show*, features several actors of color playing major and minor roles on the show, which stars Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon. All of them have messy lives that are absolutely riveting.

Well done.

Ironically, two of the women who created some of the more memorable characterizations of Black journalists initially wanted to be journalists themselves.

Although it's unlikely Yvette Lee Bowser and Clarence Page had a conversation about his mild displeasure with the *Lou Grant* series, she did create a character who ran her own magazine in her hit series *Living Single*. The ensemble comedy about four girlfriends premiered on the FOX network in 1993 and featured Queen Latifah as Khadijah James, the editor and publisher of an urban magazine called *Flava*.

When asked why the ensemble included a journalist, Bowser said, "All of the characters on the show are informed in some part by me. The characters are informed by me and my closest friends. I came up as a journalist in high school and in college and I have tremendous respect for the form and the kind of keen observance of culture and the accurate reporting of such. I wanted Khadijah to have that role and that profession because when I created the show, it was very intentional that I wanted it to be an accurate, authentic and layered portrayal of us and our existence.

"The first lens on the show was Khadijah's journalistic lens. These are the facts. This is us as we see ourselves."

Bowser said she never considered placing that character in a white newsroom because the whole point was putting her in a position where she controlled the narrative. It didn't matter that

she was the owner of a struggling magazine. All that mattered was "telling our story in our way, with our flavor and with our flair. And, at times, dealing with struggles of telling our stories with our point-of-view."

Twenty years later, Mara Brock Akil, best known as the creator of another hit ensemble comedy featuring four Black women (*Girlfriends*) revisited her formative years to create *Being Mary Jane*. The show starred Gabrielle Union as a network news anchor who had issues balancing her personal and professional lives. Like Bowser, Brock Akil also studied journalism in college but after realizing that she was not going to always be in control of her own narratives, she opted for a career in network TV production.

"I was inspired by the ghost of who I thought I was," Brock Akil said when asked about the creation of Mary Jane. "At one point I thought I would have a career in journalism—so much so that I enrolled at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern. Mary Jane was inspired by a version of myself. Having her character on air would allow me to platform some of the stories overlooked by mainstream news media that had a direct impact on our culture. I was proud to directly integrate my education at Medill into the show."

To fully understand all of the nuances of someone in Mary Jane's position, Brock Akil shadowed talk show host and former MSNBC broadcaster Tamron Hall. She credits her for providing the inspiration for the fictional Mary Jane.

"One of the things that became very clear to me in the early '90s was that it was very difficult to tell Black stories outside of crime or poverty or the superhero Black athlete/entertainer trope in mainstream news. Post college I pivoted toward entertainment with the thought that I could tell the truth about who we are as Black people through fiction. For my

first drama, I couldn't think of a better main character than a Black woman news anchor who reported the news but was sitting on many lies about her own life."

We'll Be Right Back After This Message

Livin' Large! and *Heat Wave* are definitely worth revisiting. Not only do both, in their own ways, give us a glimpse into who and what we were then, but also who and what we are today. The experiences of Dexter Jackson and Bob Richardson give us a clearer understanding why it is sometimes wise to not step through every open door.

These two men got played.

Fortunately, the fictitious Dexter Jackson was able to regroup and move on with his life. He suffered some minor scratches. In reality, however, Bob Richardson was terminally wounded by not being able to tell his stories from his own subjective viewpoint. Being a journalist of color sometimes means that you have to kick objectivity to the curb. Dexter Jackson and Bob Richardson simply wanted the opportunity to tell good stories. What they didn't realize was that the door for them was not fully open. It was just ajar. Sadly, it slammed shut when they tried too hard.

Perhaps they should have had a conversation with Page's grandmother. In his column about the Watts riots, he writes, "As my grandmother advised me back in the bad old days of all-white newsrooms, "Just prepare yourself. When the doors of opportunity open up, be ready to step inside. Wise words still" (Page, *Detroit News*, Aug. 18 2015).

Nothing but the Truth.

For journalists of color, on screen and off, the biggest burden once you are in the door is having to serve two Gods: The ones who pay you, and the ones who want to get paid with subjective loyalty.

It's a tough balancing act, but Joe Boyce says it's not really that hard.

"It's real simple," he said. "All you gotta do is tell the truth. But the only way you can tell that truth is with context. And that is what was so lacking in reporting on Black people in both these movies and in real life. There was seldom a context given for the situation that people were talking about. People are intelligent enough that if you tell them the truth, they can take it from there."

The question remains, however, where are they going to take it?

Let's hope they get it right.