

AFM Online 2021 Day 3 Highlights â?? International Film Market: Consumption of Black Culture, Rejection of Black Stories

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

The NAACP convenes a panel of storytellers to explore the myths and rigors of international distribution for black-themed content and leading roles.

Covering a plethora of relevant topics spanning from the beginning of the film industry to the present day, the convened panel of **Mo Abudu**, CEO, *EbonyLife Group*, **Dr. Darnell Hunt**, Dean of the Division of Social Sciences, and Professor of Sociology and African American Studies, *UCLA*, **Johnny Jones**, Executive Director of Worldwide Marketing Content, *Warner Bros. Pictures,* **Gabriel Lerman**, Board Member, Hollywood Foreign Press Association, **Tirrell D. Whittley**, CEO, *Liquid Sou,l* and moderator ***Kyle Bowser,*** *SVP Hollywood Bureau, NAACP,* delivered insight into the prevalent issues of international distribution of black-themed content and leading roles.

Here are a few pertinent questions and responses:

How might you answer the question of what is a black film?

Mo Abudu â?? â??For me itâ??s been a real struggle, getting our foot in the door with African stories that are also black stories. Even if Iâ??m knocking on the door of an African American, itâ??s kind of tough going because theyâ??ve got African American stories they want to tell.â?•

â??So yes, weâ??re getting our foot in the door, and weâ??re being listened to, and weâ??re having to work twice as hard. I keep saying that there are three levels of discrimination for an African woman â?? number 1, you are a woman, number 2, you are a black woman, number 3, I am an African black woman trying to sell an African story to either a white person or an African American person.â?•

We do in fact have these gatekeepers who will conclude that we do not have enough demand to justify the investmentâ?¦

Darnell Hunt â?? â??Well Iâ??m here to tell you that itâ??s all a myth â?? itâ??s not trueâ?¦.First of all, the thing you have to remember is that the global audience looks a lot more like American diversity than Europe, I mean Europe is only about 18% of the worldâ??s population and maybe 22% of the world GDP â?? all the rest of it is this rainbow around the world who want to hear diverse stories. And one of the things weâ??ve seen in the US context is that, as diversity has become more common on-screen, diverse audiences flock to it, they want to see that. Theyâ??re not going back now.â?•

Kyle Bowser â?? â??When you have these distributors who have this reticence to greenlight projects that need to travel internationally, I donâ??t think itâ??s simply because theyâ??re not good stories or because thereâ??s some shortcoming in the casting or whatever it is, I think implicitly, they are supporting a norm that was established long ago.â?•

Darnell Hunt â?? â??White supremacy is real, and it works in many different ways â?? some of it is intentional, some of its implicit biasâ?¦some of itâ??s lack of imagination to appreciate and recognize a quality story when you see it because your experience does not support it. Thatâ??s why itâ??s important to have diverse voices in the executive suites for greenlighting these stories and we just donâ??t. All of our data shows that 92% of studio heads and CEOs are white, and about 87% are male â?? that freezes out a range of voices.â?•

Projects never get made sometimes because thereâ??s not enough international interest â?? so from the perspective of the studio, how does that work out?

Johnny Jones â?? â??Itâ??s show business, and the larger companies such as Warner Bros., Disney, etc., they want a big return on their investment â?? because it is a business. So theyâ??re going after the largest common denominator in terms of what theyâ??re producing, what they know the consumers will consume, how they can sell merchandise, etc â?? itâ??s a business.â?•

â??Different content works differently in different markets.â?•

â??I think itâ??s important to be in the room where it happened, but you need a voice â?? you need a strong voice and you need leverage. And the people who have leverage, believe it or not, are some of these actors.â?•

Darnell Hunt â?? â??One of the things that we should not discount is the ways in which the audience is self-assured, not just in the US but globally. And one of the drivers of that, weâ??ve argued in our Hollywood bursar reports, is streaming. Last year during the pandemic, most new titles were released via streaming platforms, and our top 200 films, which we normally look at on the global box office, actually shifted to the most diverse in history because a lot of smaller films were released on streaming platforms. These never would have made our sample if weâ??re only looking at theatrical releases. And what that did was show the ways in which diverse audiences really gravitated towards diverse content once they knew it was there.â?•

Thoughts on the streaming space?

Mo Abudu â?? â??I often say that [Nigeria] is only 6 hours from London, youâ??re not going to the moon or something, but a lot of the times, just getting large corporations to set up a department thatâ??s even going to have an African unit can take years and years.â?•

â??Netflix has trailblazed that, theyâ??re on the continent because you know what? They donâ??t want to leave anything on the table. There is a massive audience there, there is a billion people living on the continent, the internet is spreading around the world, they are getting subscribers, so they are deciding to invest in local stories for local and local stories for global.â?•

â??We have to, as black content producers, find our â??Squid Gameâ?•, and find those big projects that make studios realize that we are worth investing in.â?•

Other general thoughts?

Tirrell D. Whittley â?? â??So when creators come in and producers come in and theyâ??re talking to a room full of white executives that donâ??t know their perspective, thereâ??s no champion on the other side of the table, no one to translate at times what certain things mean, it is a very uphill battle.â?•

â??With young people, I really try and encourage them to learn about the system, own the system, participate in the system â?? from an executive perspective. Understanding the financing, understanding the greenlight â?? the more women on that side of the table the more stories youâ??ll see â?? because they understand that womenâ??s stories matter.â?•

â??When it comes to content, specifically film and television, there is a gatekeeper system that says, â??we want to dictate what goes forward.â??â?•

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