



By Margaret Evans, Editor

We didn't watch the Oscars this year.

Some people love to brag about how they “haven't watched the Oscars in ages” and “couldn't care less about Hollywood.” We are not those people. We care about Hollywood. And we *always* watch the Oscars. But this year, the Academy Awards coincided with the Beaufort International Film Festival Awards, where Jeff and I were both presenters. We set up our TV to record the Oscars – planned to hunker down and watch the next night – but, alas, technology failed us.

So we didn't watch the Oscars this year.

But I, for one, *did* glance at them occasionally. During the BIFF after-party at Breakwater, the show was on the big screen TV behind the bar. While everybody else was mingling about, laughing and chattering and drinking, I was sitting near the bar cupping my ears, hissing “shhhhh!” while Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga sang their tender duet from *A Star is Born*.

. It was a less than optimum experience. (Thank goodness for YouTube.)

Later that night, I looked at the big screen again and saw the creators of *Green Book* receiving their Oscar for Best Picture. I couldn't hear their remarks, but I was happy for them.

Green Book

was one of my favorite films last year, and it seemed like a good, sturdy choice. I mean, who didn't love that movie, right?

Well, apparently I'd been out of the loop. As it turns out, *plenty* of people didn't love – or

even like – that movie. Most of them are film critics.

By Monday morning, multiple headlines were calling *Green Book* The Worst Best Picture Winner in a Decade. Justin Chang of the *LA Times*

wrote perhaps the most scathing attack, calling the movie “insultingly glib and hucksterish, a self-satisfied crock masquerading as an olive branch.”

The New York Times

tweeted its earlier review by A.O. Scott, who wrote, “Every suspicion you might entertain – that this will be a sentimental tale of prejudices overcome and common humanity affirmed; that its politics will be as gently middle-of-the-road as its humor; that it will invite a measure of self-congratulation about how far we, as a nation, have come – will be confirmed.”

Huffington Post

republished a piece entitled, “Green Book Is As Disappointing As It Is Tone-Deaf On Race.”

As I read article after article, I felt an all-too-familiar emotion flaring up – part frustration, part helplessness, part heartbreak – and I decided to write about a super sensitive subject against my better judgment. I’ve been doing it for almost 20 years, so why stop now?

The biggest complaint about *Green Book* seems to be that it was written by a white man and told from a white character’s point of view. Nick Vallelonga wrote the screenplay, based on stories told to him by his father, Tony “Lip” Vallelonga (played by a beefed-up Viggo Mortensen) about his 1962 road trip through the Deep South with black classical/jazz musician Dr. Donald Shirley (Mahershala Ali), who hired him as both driver and bodyguard.

According to Chang at the *LA Times*, “In its one-sided presentation and its presumptuous filtering of Shirley’s perspective through Vallelonga’s, the movie reeks of bad faith and cluelessly embodies the white-supremacist attitudes it’s ostensibly decrying.” He and other critics complain that Vallelonga has portrayed his father as some sort of White Savior figure, downplaying the horrors of the Jim Crow South – and American racism, in general – making what amounts to nothing more than a lighthearted “feel good” movie for white people.

For what it’s worth – which may not be much – this white person had a very different cinematic experience. I saw *Green Book* with my San Francisco-born husband and a couple of friends – locals originally from New York – and while we left the theater “feeling good,” we certainly weren’t light of heart. Over dinner, we discussed how uncomfortable this film we all

loved

had made us – especially me, the lifelong southerner at the table. I sat through much of the movie feeling horrified and mortified and ashamed of “my people.” I spent the next day researching different scenes from the film. As an Alabama native, I especially wanted to know which country club had denied Don Shirley entrance to their dining room. (Was it Mountain Brook? Birmingham? I still don’t know!) You could say I was slightly obsessed. The unlikely friendship that formed between Tony Lip and Don Shirley – the film suggests they saved *each other*

in a number of ways – left me feeling optimistic about the future, even as my shame over a past I never experienced seared itself more deeply into my consciousness. It seemed like a healthy response at the time. A hard, hopeful reckoning.

But now I’m told that this is a “bad” movie, especially if it left me feeling deeply relieved that we’ve left our Jim Crow past behind and optimistic about our future. Which leaves me wondering: What, then? What is a white person supposed to feel about the past? The future?

And more importantly, what is a white writer/storyteller/filmmaker supposed to *do*? Over and over we’re told that it’s up to us – white people – to “fix” society. After all, we’re the ones who broke it. Fair enough. But then a white filmmaker – Italian American, actually – comes along with an engaging, big-hearted movie that clearly aims to do just that – fix society – and the critics slap him down with a loud, vitriolic chorus of “Stay In Your Lane.”

I don’t know what to make of that. As a white southerner, I believe the shame I felt while watching *Green Book* – shame over America’s racist past, and especially the South’s – was right and proper. It’s a burden I’m willing, even eager, to bear – a catalyst for renewed vigilance and even change. But now I’m also supposed to be ashamed of relishing the movie’s gracious spirit, its glimmering promise of racial harmony?

While wrestling with all of the above – and by “wrestling” I mean “reading think pieces” – I was rescued from the slough of despond by one Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Yes, *that* Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Did you know he’s a regular columnist for the *Hollywood Reporter*?

A damn good one, too. Clearly, Kareem knew about the *Green Book*

backlash before I did, because this particular piece was published in mid-January. In it, he argues that the controversies surrounding this film – historical inaccuracies, the “white” perspective, etc. – don’t really matter, because the film hits on “greater truths” beneath the mundane facts of the story.

This is what we call “art.” And it changes people. And some of us need changing more than others.

“The film is much more effective from Tony’s point of view because the audience that might be most changed by watching it is the white audience,” writes Abdul-Jabbar. “When black people see a movie about historical racism like Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* or Steve McQueen’s

12 Years a Slave

, we know exactly what kind of horrific cruelty we’re going to witness. Our perception of racism will not be changed because we live it daily. We also know that after viewing the movie, some white people will be self-congratulatory and dismissive by saying, ‘Well, at least it’s not like that anymore.’ But others will be moved to see how those events in history have shaped our current challenges.”

[Please read the whole piece](#) if you get a chance; it’s profound. I love almost everything I’ve read by Abdul-Jabbar. He’s full of wisdom and grace and always makes this reader feel welcome at the table, as if my good intentions count for something. I know good intentions aren’t enough, but without them, we’ve got nothing. When you trash somebody’s good intentions from the get-go – or a labor of love like

Green Book

Green

it’s like dousing a spark before it even has a chance to catch fire.

The truth is that when it comes to racial reconciliation, many of us white people are awkward and clumsy. We don’t always know what to do or say or even how we should feel. But that doesn’t mean we don’t care. Many of us care rather desperately.

I know I do, anyway.

On ‘Green Book’ and Good Intentions

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor
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