

2022 Academy Awards: Will Smith's disorientation, Hollywood's and America's

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The incident involving actor Will Smith and comic Chris Rock at the Academy Awards on Sunday night has grabbed public attention worldwide. Video clips of the episode have now been viewed hundreds of millions of times.

Smith, seated in the front row at the annual film awards ceremony, charged the stage and slapped Rock on live television, after the comic had made a tasteless but essentially innocuous joke about Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, and her shaven head.

The audience at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles went silent—as did the ABC television broadcast, for an unprecedented 30 seconds or more. Upon returning to his seat, a censored (in the US) Smith could be seen twice screaming at Rock, “Keep my wife’s name out of your f---ing mouth.”

“Despite some backstage consultations, the organization and producers decided not to remove Smith from the event,” *Deadline* reported. Less than half an hour later, Smith was permitted to deliver a rambling, tearful acceptance speech after he won the best actor award for *King Richard* (directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green).

While vaguely apologizing, Smith ended up essentially defending his action, comparing himself to the figure he plays in *King Richard*, Richard Williams, the father of tennis players Venus and Serena Williams. Williams, Smith said, “was a fierce defender of his family.” Later in his speech, he commented, “I look like the crazy father, just like they said about Richard Williams, but love will make you do crazy things.”

Rock has so far declined to press assault charges with the Los Angeles police, but he would certainly be within his rights to do so. On Monday, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences issued a statement condemning “the actions of Mr. Smith at last night’s show. We have officially started a formal review around the incident and will explore further action and consequences in accordance with our Bylaws, Standards of Conduct and California law.”

On Monday night, Smith issued a more direct, if formulaic apology in an Instagram post, asserting that violence “in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behavior at last night’s Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable.” He then went on to excuse himself, on the grounds that “a joke about Jada’s medical condition was too much for me to bear and I reacted emotionally.”

Smith went on, “There is no place for violence in a world of love and kindness.” He concluded, “I am a work in progress.” The actor, generally known for his amiable and easy-going film and television persona, is 53 years old—it might be time for him to act his age. In any event, a contrite appearance *somewhere* with Oprah Winfrey would presumably allow him back into Hollywood’s good graces.

If the Academy officials possessed any genuine integrity, they

would have asked Smith to leave the Dolby Theatre and allowed him to pick up his award at some other time, or they might have delivered it to him. Statements condemning Smith’s violence, after essentially condoning it, ring entirely hollow.

The inability to discipline Smith, at least initially, speaks to the larger issues involved. The actor belongs to the world of celebrities, whose immense wealth (Smith is estimated to be worth \$350 million) and fame put them largely beyond the normal reach of the authorities or mere mortals generally—unless, of course, an alleged sexual transgression or “micro-aggression” is involved.

The cult of celebrity has reached an advanced and severely damaging stage in America, having “flourished” dramatically in recent decades. As the *actual* conditions of life have drastically worsened for tens of millions, the need to live *vicariously* through others “more fortunate,” to lead a *fantasy* life, has grown exponentially. As we noted more than two decades ago, “Excessive celebrity must be linked to inequality, indeed becomes a rationale for inequality and reinforces it, ideologically and materially. The heaping of fame and wealth upon a single individual, or a handful of individuals, is only possible and meaningful if the vast majority have no access to those rewards.”

From a rational point of view, Smith’s action was undoubtedly bizarre. The actor first smiled in response to Rock’s jibe, before apparently girding his loins for battle. As with a large portion of Hollywood personalities’ behavior, it is almost impossible in this case to distinguish *feeling* from *playing at feeling*. The assault felt contrived, artificial. Such people are always acting. We have no idea what went through Smith’s head in those few seconds. “What am I expected to do?” he might have thought. “If I just sit here, I may be laughed at for allowing my wife to be insulted in public.”

It is also possible that Smith had absorbed too much from the mediocre, Williams family-authorized “biopic” for which he was about to receive an award. He may have been acting on the basis of some nonsense he drew from the Richard Williams story about “defending” wife, family, etc. If so, it was an absurd and pathetic miscalculation. Smith now runs the risk of being remembered more for this moment than for any of his film or television appearances.

The episode on Sunday reveals something real about the Hollywood environment, but so much of that environment is itself unreal. Like everything “royal,” Hollywood royalty too has a great deal false and deceptive about it. Stars have money and attention heaped upon them, and they—and much of the public—may interpret that, under certain conditions, as a sign of quasi-divine approval. The gods, however, do not hand out the gift of full psychological and personal development so freely. An actor may have a persona, face and physique that

“works,” to one extent or another, in front of a camera, and yet remain extremely limited as a human being. Given a change in circumstances, such as took place between Smith’s slap and his pitiable, semi-incoherent acceptance speech a short while later, a Hollywood “prince” may suddenly appear to be “only a washed-out man with a flabby lower lip,” to borrow a phrase.

Smith’s reference to the fact that there was “no place for violence in a world of love and kindness” has to be seen in the proper context. The incident Sunday night was immediately shocking, because public events in the US, pre-packaged and largely embalmed, are not usually intruded upon by anything unexpected.

But, in the larger sense, there is not the slightest reason to view the Smith-Rock altercation as “shocking.” American life is exceedingly, excessively violent. Some 40,000 people, for example, are killed by guns every year in the US. Three months into 2022, there have already been 112 mass shootings, more than one a day, and more than 4,400 killings and more than 5,800 suicides involving firearms.

American military forces are everywhere. The Pentagon *officially* acknowledges some 800 bases around the world, in 80 countries. After making war on and devastating Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and other countries, resulting in mass death and misery, the Biden administration has turned its attention toward Russia and threatens to unleash a third world war.

Moreover, the specific conditions of 2022, in the midst of an entirely avoidable pandemic, that has ended 1 million lives in the US, must be factored into the maddened, desperate goings-on at the Academy Awards and in other arenas. The film industry may officially ignore COVID-19, having devoted no more than a minute or two Sunday night to the catastrophic pandemic, but COVID-19 has not ignored the film industry. Performers, writers and crew members have lost their lives. Devastating financial losses took place in 2020 and 2021. The future of the movie theater business is in question. Hollywood has increasingly become a factory for producing a handful of bland, empty “blockbusters.” The normal insecurity of the acting profession has been multiplied by a significant factor.

Inevitably, the legitimately appalled response to the Smith outburst has been seized upon by the identity politics brigade as a sign of “white racism.” *The Guardian* headlined an article, “White outrage about Will Smith’s slap is rooted in anti-Blackness. It’s inequality in plain sight.” The piece claimed that the reaction to the Smith slap “feels precious at best, and downright racist at worst.” The backlash against Smith, we are told, “is rooted in not just anti-Blackness, but respectability politics as well.” This type of “performative pearl-clutching is only ever reserved for Black men who mess up.”

These stupid, preposterous remarks were echoed in various quarters. For all intents and purposes, National Public Radio (NPR) defended Smith, referring to the “many online” who asserted that “For once ... here was a Black man publicly sticking up for his Black wife—and her Black hair—on a stage where Blackness has historically been overlooked or outright shunned.”

Race and gender politics received their inevitable, disgraceful due at the Academy Awards ceremony itself. Virtually nothing takes place in Hollywood these days that has not been vetted by the identity politics censors and calculators. When Ariana DeBose, the least impressive of the lead performers in *West Side Story*, accepted her award as best supporting actress, she presented herself as “an openly queer woman of color, an Afro?Latina, who found her strength in life through art.”

Overall, if the Smith-Rock episode could overshadow the rest of the awards program, it was because the rest of the awards program could

so relatively easily be overshadowed.

The incident highlighted a ceremony that struck the wrong note at almost every turn. While *CODA*, a generally well-intentioned and humane film, won awards for best picture, supporting actor (Troy Kotsur) and adapted screenplay (director Siân Heder), the two most serious works by far up for awards, the biting satire *Don’t Look Up* (Adam McKay) and Joel Coen’s *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, came away empty-handed.

As we noted in February, *Minamata* (Andrew Levitas) and *A Hero* (Asghar Farhadi), neither of which received any nominations, were “the two most obviously deserving films ... entirely and disgracefully ignored by Academy voters.” For that matter, with all its limitations, Steven Spielberg-Tony Kushner’s *West Side Story* (one award) involved far greater thought and skill than most the films that gathered in numerous prizes.

All in all, it should come as no surprise that much of the American population is alienated from and even hostile toward the film world, which largely turns its back on the population’s greatest problems and focuses incessantly on petty issues of vital interest to the affluent middle class. ABC’s broadcast of the Academy Awards on Sunday attracted an estimated audience in the US of 15.3 million viewers, an improvement on last year’s all-time low of 10.4 million, but still the second worst in history. As recently as 1998, more than 48 million Americans watched the ceremony.

At one point, for several decades of the last century, the Hollywood film studios and considerable sections of the American population spoke the same language, or at least could understand one another.

“In January 1940,” David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace explained, John Ford’s “*The Grapes of Wrath* [a film about the Great Depression and its victims] opened to unanimous critical praise, surprise, and awe. Public response was equally overwhelming. Opening day attendance at New York’s Rivoli Theatre broke all previous records.” William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives*, about the difficulties of World War II veterans, sold an estimated 55 million movie tickets in 1946, i.e., to more than half the adult population. But then, overall, 80 million people went to movie theaters every week that year.

Developments in the class struggle, the emergence of a mass movement aimed against the foundations of the existing social order, must bring forward new artistic voices and forces onto the scene. The present situation is simply untenable.



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