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Contact:

Robin Gordon Jr.

503-890-5393

[robindgordon@gmail.com](mailto:robindgordon@gmail.com)

**The Slap That Woke Up A Nation**

**By: E. D. Mondainé Jr.**

I've had mixed emotions about offering this commentary amidst the astronomical number of articles written surrounding the Will Smith and Chris Rock moment at the Oscars. However, a few thoughts, not much mentioned in those many correspondences, come to mind. As I read the headlines describing the violent actions at the long-awaited 2022 Oscars presentations, the one that spoke the loudest was, "The slap heard around the world”. However, I'd like to offer this as a headline, "The slap that awakened a nation."

During the 94th Academy Awards on Sunday night, March 27, 2022, the country witnessed the event's best and worst times for African Americans. For decades critics have painfully pointed to the lack of racial diversity among the Academy's nominees. Yet, in the long history of the celebrated awards show, Black artistry and presence were centered throughout this year's event.

So this is what happened: One of the event's presenters, Chris Rock, in his dialogue, used a joke about Jada Pinkett Smith's shaven head, referencing Demi Moore's character in the movie, G.I. Jane. Will Smith then walked onstage, slapped Rock across the face, and rejoined his wife Jada at their table, shouting at Rock twice to "Keep my wife's name out of your f---ing mouth!"

In my view, this was the beginning of the worst of times for the Oscar's Black audience that had long awaited to witness a more inclusive and diverse Academy Awards event. Ironically, just six years ago, Jada Pinkett Smith and Spike Lee boycotted the 2016 awards show due to the lack of racial diversity. Also, there wasn't one Black actor nominated for the coveted award in any acting category in that year. Yet, in that year, we saw remarkable performances by Michael B. Jordan in "Creed" and Corey Hawkins in "Straight Outta Compton" that should have shown up as top contenders.

The Academy took note of the criticisms, agreed, and began drafting changes. In 2020, new representation and inclusion standards were introduced, and scheduled for implementation in 2024. In addition, this year, we saw Emmy-nominated producer Will Packer brought on to oversee the 94th Oscars. Packer made Academy history as the first Black producer and led The Oscar's first all-Black production team. Sunday night's production of the Academy Awards was a leap forward toward the critical change that the Academy was striving to see.

This year four Black actors were nominated for Oscars: Ariana DuBose – who is also Latina, Aunjanue Ellis, Denzel Washington, and Will Smith, who became the fifth African American male to win an Oscar for Best Actor. I want to credit the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for attempting to diversify the Hollywoods film industry.

The incident between Will Smith and Chris Rock triggered incredible anxiety within me, as I'm sure it did many Americans, and it resonated for days. Today, I carry unsettled emotions when watching the debacle in the news or in social media clips. There is a great expectation from those of us who look to black leadership to bridge the gap between acceptance and inclusion. Because of my experience as a leader, I know the intense disappointment when our examples fail due to publicly exposed shortcomings.

But, I hope that the calamity that befell two of our country's elite and leading Black representatives of our culture is a fall forward and viewed not as an atrocity, but as an opportunity that becomes a teachable moment.

What happened at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles on Sunday evening points us to what appears as Black men inflicting violence against each other. Heaven knows that the world doesn't need to see two of the most successful and recognizable Black men in the country seemingly give emotional and physical violence a stamp of approval. For some, the stereotype of the uncontrolled angry Black man became front and centered. In rhythm with the homicidal and violent crime rates rising in America, we'll find Black men shouldering the excessive weight of these statistics.

Sunday nights interaction between Smith and Rock as Black men could quickly become a magnet for racist derision. Conversely, prestigious events such as The Academy Awards become a welcome opportunity for African American artists to send a message of hope to help awaken a broken and racist nation.

The slap that wakes up a nation showcases two men from the same side of the track, both traumatized by silent enemies, both of the inner personal intra-familial experiences and the other of social marginalization of Black Men.

While offering no excuses for the wrongful and shocking behavior of Will Smith, I will argue that there were other issues at play. In his recently released autobiography, Smith shared his feelings about living a fraudulent life due to his inability to protect his mother as a child. The abuse he watched regularly perpetrated upon her at the hands of an abusive father was indeed a socio-structural stressor. In his acceptance speech, Smith references his character in King Richard (Richard Williams), adding that he had finally found the courage to protect the women in his life. There are indeed socio-structural stressors that haunt Black men without regard to status.

Also, let us be clear, Chris Rock displayed the portrait of The powerful resilient Black Man by showing resistance to what I believe derived from suppressed and social triggers.

Rock led us to the epitome of being a Black man; resilient despite difficult challenges, taking notes and learning from hardships, focused on addressing difficulties, and drawing near to the spiritual connection between him and his God.

Yes, the slap the American public heard at the 2022 Oscars was heard worldwide, but we would be remiss and robbed of the opportunity to awaken our nation.

Echoing the sentiments of "RACE TALKS," Donna Maxey, "Hopefully, Will Smith and Chris Rock will work together to highlight their childhood issues--domestic abuse, bullying, and violence--physical & emotional. If so, They both will go down in history as heroes in perpetuity."

Jada Pinkett Smith released a statement the following day of this atrocity. It read, "This is a season for healing, and I'm here for it." I hope we all show up for the healing service and stand in the prayer line. Yes, America, we saw the best and worst of the Oscars on Sunday night; however, we are experiencing the best Oscars today. The American public has won the highest award ever given to humanity, the opportunity to learn and heal.

In the words of Chris Rock, "That was the greatest night in the history of television." It was indeed Brother Rock, and thank you for bringing home the Gold.

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E. D. Mondainé Jr. is an activist, entrepreneur, recording artist, and former president of the Portland Chapter of the NAACP. Founder of the Black American Chamber Of Commerce, he is also Sr. pastor of Celebration Tabernacle Church in Portland, OR and Grace Center, St. Louis, MO.