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WHERE'S MY STORY?

Actor **David Oyelowo** says we need new faces on screen

Ten years ago, soon after my time on the BBC's spy drama series *Spooks*, I tried to capitalise on the notoriety that show had given me by approaching UK broadcasters with the idea of doing a period drama set in 1800s London. The story I was touting was rich, vibrant and set in the visceral world of bare-knuckle boxing. It had romance, intrigue, action and adventure – it also happened to have a black protagonist.

The project was rejected repeatedly, not because of the quality of the writing or the story, but because of the notion that a British audience might be confused by watching a period drama featuring black characters who historically walked the vibrant streets of London in the late 19th century. The Britain I know is diverse, multicultural and full of people whose history has barely been visited on UK screens.

There are many who will see the title of this piece and roll their eyes before turning to the next page while muttering the words "not again". When it comes to talking about diversity on our screens, I feel the same way. I'm tired of the fact that this is still an issue and is seemingly getting worse. It's time for a change, but the question is – what needs to change in order for the frustrating regression of diversity on British television to cease?

In my opinion, solving this problem requires a layered approach. The work of organisations like TriForce Creative Network, of which I am now a patron, is invaluable. TriForce gives people from diverse backgrounds a place and forum to grow, build solidarity and a platform to be heard, and this is crucial.

The systemic exclusion of black and minority ethnic people from decision-making positions of power must also be addressed.

We are all guilty of being self-serving, we all want our team, our tribe to do well. In life, we are the centre of our own stories and when we watch a film or TV drama we transpose ourselves onto the protagonist. Because almost all the people in control of TV and film production in the UK are

white, and they are telling stories through their own eyes, nearly all the protagonists we see on TV look like them and not me. The complaint is not that this is fundamentally wrong, it's simply that millions of people in Britain also look like me.

I love my country, I'm British and proud of it, and my start as an actor was richly nourished by my training at Lamda, my nurturing at the RSC and my opportunities on British TV, but it's saddening to see the kind of opportunities for black actors dwindling instead of increasing.

‘Many people will roll their eyes and say, “not again...”’

I have a constant stream of black and Asian friends from the UK who pass through my home in LA bemoaning this, as they scabble around for work visas and acting opportunities.

America is by no means perfect when it comes to the issue of diversity, but one of the major differences is that in the States there is a level of diversity among the power players and decision-makers in the entertainment industry. *Selma* is a film I spent years doing all I possibly could to get made. If Oprah Winfrey hadn't heeded my call to be a producer, there's a real chance that film would never have been made.

She is incredibly discerning and powerful, so her advocacy gives a studio or financier the confidence they need to invest. My next film, *The Queen of*

Katwe, is a story set in Uganda about a chess prodigy from the slums of Katwe. On paper that's not a film you'd expect Disney to make, but it was championed by a studio exec of Ugandan parentage. Without him the film would not have been made.

There are fantastic British film producers who are white and who feel passionate about the issue of diversity, but the point remains that no one is going to be as passionate about telling your stories and your history as you are.

David Oyelowo is a patron of TriForce Creative Network
thetcn.com



STAR ROLE

David Oyelowo as Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King in *Selma*