
News Release



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Will 100 Years Of Hollywood Racism Continue For Native Americans?

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Designed to extend the proverbial “olive branch” to Native America for over 100 years of documented film and television racism and discrimination, the Celebrity Festival For Native America (CFNA), part of the Ticci Man Project, now appears shunned by Hollywood, say organizers.

The planned world-televised event had promised to bring millions in revenues and hundreds of jobs to Hollywood businesses as well as theater and television production while advancing parody for Native Americans. After failing to gain the support of the mayor’s office, chamber of commerce, major studios, broadcast networks, top talent agencies, over 300 major celebrities, and other influence makers, the project is preparing to shut down long before the 2010 summer event, say organizers.

“Status quo executives I get, but I’m shocked our celebrity class will not intercede as hero on behalf of our nation’s smallest, neediest, and most assailed minority—our stars are shaking my faith in them,” said Zelan Bonn, president of the Kon Ticci International (KTI), the nonprofit group hosting the event.

The massive festival was to celebrate and showcase Native American culture, beauty, and talent to both industry and world viewers, as well as display industry’s willingness to work toward a more positive and inclusive future for Native Americans. The project was to center on a wall-sized Native painting blow-up that was to be autographed throughout the festival week by Hollywood’s celebrity class, thus symbolically extending the “olive branch” and setting the stage for a brighter future for all Native Americans and world Indians. The historical art was to be preserved for future generations in a national museum honoring Native Americans, indelibly cementing Hollywood’s new, positively charged role.

Organizers point out that diversity progress for other minorities has past proven laudable. Today, Blacks consume nearly double their population percentage points in terms of Screen Actors Guild (SAG) contracts, while Latinos boast an entire national and international network devoted to Spanish programming and employing thousands of talented Hispanics, and more. Even Asians and women have had rich success, featuring many powerful heroes and heroines in major films and network series. Yet clearly absent are America’s smallest and least vocal minority, Native Americans, who have never been granted equal treatment from Hollywood, according to an extensive survey of industry outputs and academic studies reported on the group’s Ticci Man Project website.

While making up about 1% of the US population, Native Americans have an almost non-existent share of SAG’s contract market, with less than .3% market share. However, when only talents with official U.S. tribal affiliations are tabulated, Native Americans may have less than .05%, a dramatic but clear disparity between them and other minorities that indelibly brands the industry with a septic stigma.

SAG's Presidential Task Force for the American Indian has been working on this issue for years but without great success, says KTI spokespersons. A much larger effort is now called for, they say.

The event was to culminate with the Ticci Man World Theater followed by the Ticci Man After Party, an exclusive black tie affair to be televised to over ¼ billion world viewers and attended by not only top celebrities, but by over 100 world leaders and dignitaries.

Charity proceeds had been tagged to help a variety of worthy Native American projects, including reservation homes for the elderly and homeless, cultural and language rejuvenation, Indian job creation, film and television scholarships and more, say spokespersons.

After several failed attempts to get celebrities onboard to donate just 3 hours in exchange for a night of world-class entertainment, as well as the opportunity to cocktail mingle with dignitaries, organizers are now reluctantly expecting to close doors by year's end.

"Nothing in this industry gets done unless it's forced on [them]," said the late Marlon Brando during a 1973 interview concerning the industry and its endemic racism.

Much racism stems from society being bombarded for decades by over 4,000 films that have been derogatory toward Native Americans and their history, reports KTI's website. And much misinformation still surrounds Native America, they claim. For example, many Americans mistakenly believe the majority of Indians are wealthy from Indian gaming, yet only a tiny fraction receives benefits from such. Many Indians continue to suffer Third World conditions on reservations, while Indians of the world must endure even harsher conditions and racial discrimination, they offer.

"To date, Hollywood has not produced one major studio film or broadcast series with a tribally recognized Native American in the lead role portraying a modern-day Indian character," said Bonn. "All federally protected minority classes but Indians have enjoyed that level of equality, cultural recognition and respect in Hollywood," he said. "This sort of thing is as reprehensible as skinning live puppies and must be corrected soon unless we intend to perpetuate a racist and discriminatory Hollywood—it reflects darkly on all of us who work here—especially our cherished celebrities that are expected to stand up for America's underdogs," said Bonn who is also a producer.

Not to be outdone, the greater Native American community, still largely embittered by Hollywood's historical treatments, has also temporarily withheld project support—largely distrustful of industry's willingness to exact major and positive reforms—a position that now appears well justified.

"One side must extend the olive branch before the other side can consider honoring such a magnanimous and historical humanitarian gesture," said Bonn. "Hollywood's ultimate rejection of this project may forever scar our industry and deny us the wonders and beauty of America's first people and their magnificent cultures and talents," he said. "If this level of racism had been plied on Jews in Hollywood, think how tragic and ashen our world would be for us having never known so many admired talents," said Bonn. "Both Jews and Indians escaped genocide in the past but only the Indian remains a second class citizen in Hollywood today—fixing that in within our collective power—we owe it not only to them, but to ourselves and our industry if we have any honor and dignity left."

In a March 18, 1996 open letter to the entertainment community, Rev Jesse Jackson lamented, "... Why have there been no [Academy Award] nominations for Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans or Native Americans... The paucity of nominations for people of color is directly related to the lack of films featuring the talents of people of color... We will protest institutional racism that manifests itself in several ways: racial exclusion, cultural distortion, lack of employment opportunities and lack of positions of authority..."

While it took sustained major social and political pressure to force Hollywood to help Blacks obtain parody, the most abused minority in US history received no coattail ride, says organizers. And it's largely because the industry has consumed so much of its own propaganda on the Indian, they claim.

"If I didn't know better, I would say Joseph Goebbels was running Hollywood when it comes to the collective mistreatment of Indians," said Bonn. "Only the elder Jew knows firsthand the Indian's plight."

A similar sentiment was first forwarded by Rev Jackson in his open letter:

"...We have seen the horrible implications of this phenomenon before. When Hitler rose to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were forbidden to work in the film industry. Motion pictures were produced to fulfill a propagandistic need to create "the other." Thus films such as *The Eternal Jew* (1940 by Franz Hippler) portrayed Polish Jews living in squalor in the Warsaw ghetto as the "normal condition" of Jews and films such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935 Leni Riefenstahl) exalted the myth of Aryan superiority."

Hollywood, for all its glamour and fantasy, appears unwilling to face its own brutal inhumanity.

"I don't think people realize what the motion picture industry has done to the American Indian," said Marlon Brando during a 1973 Dick Cavett interview. "People don't realize how deeply these people are injured.... Indian children, seeing Indians represented as savage, ugly, as nasty, as vicious, treacherous, drunken, they grow up with only a negative image of themselves, and it lasts a lifetime."

Brando refused an Oscar for his work in the *Godfather* in a failed attempt during the 1973 Academy Awards to get American Indians exposure and voice for their plight in both America and Hollywood before millions of viewers. He was ridiculed by some of his peers for his selfless humanitarianism. When later asked if he was sorry for having done it, he simply said, "...no... since the American Indian has not had the opportunity to have his voice heard anywhere in the history of the United States... I felt [they] had a right to, in view of what Hollywood has done to them."

"When actors accept work from studios, networks, and production companies that routinely ply racism against Native Americans using the same excuses that once barred Blacks, then they become a party to their employer's actions, thus a defacto racist," said Bonn. "For who is more guilty, the supremacist in the white sheet, or the worker that blind-eye helps them ply their despicable deeds?"

"Our celebrities have an historical opportunity here to press their unique collective power into a selfless starburst of social light to advance Hollywood from the stone age—and do it in a classy, beautiful, and positively charged way—that's what CFNA was designed to do," he said. "Stardom can be used for good or evil—CFNA is not the dark side, protecting the status quo with silence and acquiescence is."

Organizers say they will keep the project alive until mid December, hoping for a change of heart from the film and television industry, especially the celebrity class and community leaders and donors. Learn more at www.ticciman.com