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Black stuntmen fought for equal rights behind the scenes



Evelyn Cuffee, 80, member of the Black Stuntmen's Association in Nevada, participates during a BSA reunion at the home of member Willie Harris in Las Vegas Saturday, Aug. 9, 2014. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

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Willie Harris can tell many stories about the racism he faced in Hollywood.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, the remaining members of the Black Stuntmen's Association retell their brushes with actors and movie studios that fought tooth and nail to make sure African-American stuntmen were excluded from work.

Before Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, Spike Lee or Tyler Perry made their way in the industry, Harris and a group of black stuntmen fought for equal rights behind the scenes.

“Blacks didn’t just jump into Hollywood,” says Harris, the president of the Black Stuntmen’s Association. “We had to fight. Not just for us. For all people of color. We were the ones in the trenches.”

Today, they are working to tell people about that history.

“We want to make the public aware,” he says. “We want to let our children know what contributions we had on the industry. We helped open the door for actors like Denzel to walk through.”

William Upton, who started with the group when he was 13 years old, compares the situation to the Tuskegee Airmen — African-American pilots who fought during World War II.

“It took them a while to get recognized,” he says. “They fought to fly while we fought to jump off the roof and fly through the air for a stunt.”

In the 1960s, when civil rights was being fought on a national scene with protests and sit-ins, black actors in Hollywood were also pushing back against discrimination in the studios.

More prominent actors defied the odds set against them.

“There were no black producers, makeup artists, camera operators, nothing,” Stuntman, Calvin Brown said.

Instead of casting a black stuntman, the director hired a white male and painted him black to perform the stunt.

When Eddie Smith formed the Black Stuntmen’s Association in 1967, it had 31 members — three women and 28 men. Today, only 19 are alive. “We have been losing one or two a year,” Harris says.

Remaining members from the group gathered at Harris’ house in Las Vegas — the group had its first reunion in Las Vegas in 2007 — to tell stories for a documentary being produced by Marques Miles.

In Harris’ garage, Miles sits among the group asking them questions about their history in the industry and collecting story after story.

Collectively, these guys have credits in major films such as “Dirty Harry,” “Apocalypse Now” and “Blazing Saddles.”

But it was hard work to get that work.

“It blows my mind they had to fight to do a job so dangerous,” Miles says. “They had to fight to be in a life-threatening profession.”

Even after fighting and getting hired, Harris says they faced inequitable conditions, including being underpaid.

Brown once found a production manifest that listed wages. For the same stunts in the same scenes, the white stuntman made \$200 and he was paid \$120.

“We fought each other in that scene,” he says. “We should have been paid the same.”

The group also had to fight for safety, too.

“A white person was given three chances to rehearse, while a black person had to do it on the spot,” Brown says. “With us, they didn’t take time to set up the shot properly.”

They suffered injuries — some that put them in the hospital — from people intentionally trying to hurt or kill them, the stuntmen say.

“We used to have a saying in the industry,” Upton says. “You gotta live to collect.”

It was just as hard for black women in the industry, says Evelyn Cuffee, who was the first woman with the Black Stuntmen’s Association.

As a tomboy and the only girl of seven children, she didn’t fear doing stunts. “I always found it really exciting,” she says.

Cuffee joined the guys on high falls, riding horses and motorcycles and swimming. Her resume includes movies “Buck and the Preacher,” “Starsky & Hutch” and “Earthquake.”

Like the men she worked with, Cuffee fought against persistent racism.

“I was at a shoot where I was the only black woman and there was three white women. They took all three white women,” she says, echoing the frustrations the men had about trying to get hired. “Or they would send us to the wrong places for shoots. They would tell us we showed up late when we know we hadn’t.”

But nothing would stop a determined Cuffee.

“I had children and needed a way to put food on the table,” she says.

Eventually the group had had enough.

In the 1970s, the Black Stuntmen’s Association filed multiple lawsuits in federal court.

The lawsuits they won required studios to hire, train and advance individuals, in front of and behind the camera, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation or nationality.

“I feel the stunt group had an impact on the entire industry,” Cuffee says. “Without us, the other doors wouldn’t have opened.”

Decades later, Harris says, the group began getting the credit it deserved.

The Congressional Black Caucus recognized the Black Stuntmen’s Association in 2009, and in 2012, it was honored at the 43rd Annual NAACP Image Awards.

In 2016, the group is scheduled to be inducted into the Smithsonian Institute as pioneers in the Motion Picture Industry, Upton says.

More people will hear their story with this upcoming documentary, written by one of the BSA members, Stuntwoman, Phyllis Linda Ellis, the BSA's Documentary Coordinator/ Writer, which will come out in the near future.

"These are people who thought they would never have the opportunity to have their stories told," Miles says. "It's about time they get recognized."

Along with the group, Miles has conducted interviews with prominent black actors such as Louis Gossett, Jr.

Miles says telling this story is especially important for him being an African-American in the film industry.

"They paved the way for people like me to do well in the industry," he says. "Without them, where would I be?"