

“An Impermeable Structure”: Minority and Female Employment

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At first glance, it appears that the concerns about the lack of diversity on television are in the past. Narrowcasting and multicultural ensemble casts have resulted in an increased but limited presence of characters/actors of color onscreen. This increased diversity, while much needed, does not solve the bigger issue, which is the continued lack of diversity in positions of power behind the scenes.

For example, the increased presence of African Americans onscreen has not resulted in a significant increase in African American showrunners, writers, directors, etc. While it is easy to cite Shonda Rhimes as an example that we are in a post-racial era in television, she remains an exception to the rule. A few years ago, there was a lot of excitement over Rhimes' production company, ShondaLand, setting up a deal with Issa Rae (creator/star of the popular web series *Awkward Black Girl*) to develop a comedy for television. However, ABC passed on the ShondaLand-Rae project, and Rae is now working on developing a different series for HBO. In addition, during this year's upfronts, ABC received a lot of attention for its increase in diverse programming (*Scandal*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, *Black-ish*, and *Cristela*). *Black-ish* marks the return of the black-oriented sitcom to ABC since *My Wife and Kids* (2001-2005). These examples demonstrate that we are not in a post-racial America and that the issues with representation and diversity from the 20th century remain problematic in 21st century television.

Although lack of diversity behind-the-scenes remains an issue, there are some individuals who have been successful by taking a non-traditional route to getting a television series on the air. One example is Tyler Perry. His 10/90 deal with TBS for *House of Payne* resulted in a successful series run (254 episodes) and it became a model for other cable sitcoms (*Anger Management*, *Partners*, *George*). In 2013, Perry made the transition from TBS to OWN. His drama, *The Haves and the Have Nots* is one of OWN's highest rated shows. Perry's second hour-long drama, *If Loving You is Wrong*, debuts on September 9th. He also has two sitcoms on OWN.

Perry is known as a multi-hyphenate; he writes, directs, and produces, but he also employs a significant number of African Americans behind-the-scenes. Tyler Perry Studios is the largest employer of African Americans in Hollywood. For example, Roger Bobb worked for Perry as the Executive Vice President of Tyler Perry Studios until 2011; he left to start his own production company, Bobbcat Films. Bobb and Bobbcat Films have played an instrumental role in the development of original programming for Bounce TV. Bobbcat Films also produces *The Rickey Smiley Show* for TVOne.

Yet the “Tyler Perry Way” is not the fix-all solution to increasing minority employment behind the scenes. There is not an easy fix. A good first step is to acknowledge that we are not in a post-racial society and admit that race does still matter. For example, Paul Lee skirted the issue this year during the upfronts by talking about “authenticity” vs.

diversity. Even the executive producers for *Black-ish* did not want to discuss the topic in detail and said the series is more about culture than race. Real change will come when more minority directors, writers, creators, etc. are given the opportunity to showcase their talent. For this to happen there needs to be changes made throughout the entire industry.