

The attacks on *Green Book* and the racist infection of the affluent middle class

By David Walsh and Joanne Laurier
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As the WSWS previously noted, the decision to bestow the Best Picture award on *Green Book* (directed by Peter Farrelly) at the Academy Awards on February 24 triggered a furious response in the American media, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and elsewhere.

How dare the Academy honor a work that suggested whites and blacks could get along, that they might even learn from each other and overcome prejudices, and that, indeed, social progress depended upon such interactions! What outdated, regressive, hopelessly naïve views! Bridge the gap between “white America” and “black America”? What a fantasy!

The official media spoke almost as one: *Green Book*, with its suggestion that human beings can be enlightened and undergo change (in this case, an Italian American worker from the Bronx), is primarily designed to make whites “feel good” when the reality, according to such elements, is that the white population is thoroughly racist, now and forever.

The outpouring continues. The racist infection of the affluent middle class, including its “left” elements, has reached an advanced stage. In many cases, and we write this advisedly, there is not a great deal of difference between the current infection and the fascist-nationalist ideology that helped produce such immense tragedy in the first half of the 20th century. Something deeply sick and reactionary is occurring in these layers.

At the same time, popular sentiment in favor of *Green Book* is considerable. Some of the vile reviews and columns have provoked a response, including in online commentary.

A social and moral divide has opened up, on this question as on many, between the cynical, selfish petty bourgeoisie, obsessed with its wealth and advancement—and the great majority of the working population, essentially decent and democratic in its outlook and, in fact, relatively generous in its attitude toward differences and tolerant of human foibles. (*Green Book*, in fact, won the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival last September, a fact which the film’s detractors find revealing and unforgivable.)

Summing up the state of affairs, Indiewire noted that the victory of *Green Book* at the Academy Awards “was immediately met with outrage from movie journalists and critics on social media, who all felt a sense of déjà vu in watching a polarizing drama about race relations.” Polarizing? This is not a case of a film with some dubious or inflammatory, possibly right-wing message. The “polarization” in this case occurs between this crowd of hardened racists in the media, official politics and the universities and the general public, which is moving in another direction.

Again, for those who have not seen *Green Book*, it concerns an Italian-American bouncer, Tony “Lip” Vallelonga (Viggo Mortensen) who is hired as a driver and escort for black pianist, Dr. Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali), during a tour of the Midwest and Jim Crow South in 1962. The script was co-written by Vallelonga’s son. Over the course of the two months, the two men become close. One of the film’s most poignant moments occurs after Vallelonga has discovered, as the result of an unhappy incident involving the police, that Shirley is gay. “I’ve been

working nightclubs in New York City my whole life,” Vallelonga says. “I know it’s a... complicated world.”

There are Hollywood-esque aspects of the film and no doubt a certain simplification takes place of a highly complicated and intense event and relationship. Some of that, however, is almost inevitable when such thorny issues are involved. All in all, this is a popular film working at a high level, that both entertains and sheds light on important matters.

In any case, the racially obsessed commentators are not criticizing *Green Book* for its weaknesses, but its considerable strengths. The notion, for example, that a piece of trash such as *Black Panther* or Spike Lee’s poorly constructed and tedious—and in its most “political” sections, utterly contrived and unconvincing—*BlacKkKlansman* was more worthy of the Best Picture award is simply laughable. The bitter complaints directed against *Green Book* (along with Lee’s own disgraceful performance at the award ceremony) have next to nothing to do with the film’s art, and nearly everything to do with its social outlook and optimism.

Lest we be accused of exaggerating the pernicious assault on *Green Book*, it is necessary to cite more passages than we would care to from its treatment in the media.

Heaping scorn on the possibility of whites and blacks getting along has been a favorite theme. *Vanity Fair* magazine, for example, commented: “*Green Book* purports to be about racial reconciliation, a popular sentiment among people who want *everyone*, holding hands, to take responsibility for ending white supremacy—not just its beneficiaries. It’s a troubling, tedious idea, but a very common one—rooted, I think, in a desire to be forgiven.”

Teen Vogue argued brilliantly that “*Green Book* Won Best Picture at the Oscars Because it Made White People Feel Good About Themselves.” Apparently, “white people” should only “Feel Bad” about themselves. This kind of reactionary rhetoric helps drive layers of the population into the arms of the extreme right.

One of the fouler pieces, which we have commented on previously, appeared in the *New York Times* prior to the Academy Awards, “Why Do the Oscars Keep Falling for Racial Reconciliation Fantasies?” (January 23), by Wesley Morris. In that piece, Morris counterposed Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) to *Green Book*. He described Lee’s miserable film as a “masterpiece about a boiled-over pot of racial animus in Brooklyn.” That movie, he asserted, “dramatized a starker truth—we couldn’t all just get along.” In 1989, Lee “was pretty much on his own as a voice of black racial reality ... He helped plant the seeds for an environment in which black artists can look askance at race.” As opposed to those who “had been reared on racial-reconciliation fantasies,” Lee understood, according to Morris, that “closure is impossible because the blood is too bad, too historically American.”

Morris followed up this foulness by taking part in a conversation about the Academy Awards with two other *New York Times* critics, A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis (“What ‘Green Book’ Says About the Academy. Our Critics on the Oscars,” February 25).

(It apparently doesn't occur to either Morris, Scott or Dargis, in their petty bourgeois blindness and obtuseness, that their very intellectual and personal cooperation puts the lie to their opposition to "racial-reconciliation fantasies." How do they, two white people and one black, "get along"? Why aren't they at each other throats before 10 minutes has passed?)

In the course of the three-way discussion, Scott complained that "the best picture trophy went to a movie whose best friend is black [sic], a movie that doesn't see color, a movie about how all lives matter." Horrors! Aside from the fact that the claim is patently untrue—racism, both in Vallelonga's family and in the Deep South, is a very active issue in *Green Book*—the reader is evidently supposed to respond with indignation to the fact that the movie "doesn't see color" and suggests "all lives matter."

That such views are anathema within this milieu, and that Scott and company see nothing objectionable about holding such reactionary views, is an indication of how far to the right this well-heeled liberal and even "left" layer has moved.

The Guardian in Britain (of course!) chimed in to claim, in a column by Joseph Harker, that "*Green Book*'s Oscar shows Hollywood still doesn't get race—A best picture for this trite, nostalgic white-centred tale? The academy wants us to believe racism no longer exists." On the contrary, of course, Farrelly is obviously disturbed by present-day conditions, including the growth of the extreme right and fascistic forces encouraged by the Trump administration, and intends his work to be a cautionary tale.

Harker, like many of the critics, objects strenuously to the notion that Vallelonga, "a racist white driver," is "somehow 'saved' by his black passenger." This was one of Morris' themes too, in his January 23 piece, in which he denounced *Green Book* for its

"particularly perverse fantasy" that "absolution resides in a neutered black man needing a white guy not only to protect and serve him, but to love him, too." This is not only malicious, but stupid. In any event, as we have previously noted, the civilizing influence of one human being or layer of the population on another is simply ruled out of order by this logic.

Another particularly repellent and provocative piece, by Justin Chang, appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 24. Chang, a *LA Times* film critic and identity politics zealot, is especially venomous: "Peter Farrelly's interracial buddy dramedy is insultingly glib and hucksterish, a self-satisfied crock masquerading as an olive branch. It reduces the long, barbaric and ongoing history of American racism to a problem, a formula, a dramatic equation that can be balanced and solved. 'Green Book' is an embarrassment; the film industry's unquestioning embrace of it is another.

Chang goes on in this right-wing vein at considerable length. To a certain extent, the review has to be read to be believed.

The *LA Times* critic acknowledges that his views are not popular: "I can tell I've already annoyed some of you, though if you take more offense at what I've written than you do at 'Green Book,' there may not be much more to say. Differences in taste are nothing new, but there is something about the anger and defensiveness provoked by this particular picture that makes reasonable disagreement unusually difficult. Maybe 'Green Book' really is the movie of the year after all—not the best movie, but the one that best captures the polarization that arises whenever the conversation shifts toward matters of race, privilege and the all-important question of who gets to tell whose story."

Yes, we will point out once again, the "polarization" exists between this aspiring, grasping petty bourgeois and wide layers of the population struggling to get by economically and hostile to the obsession with racial and gender politics.

An interview published in the *Nation* ("Hollywood Is Still a Sundown

Town for Black Representation," February 26) pointed to this social reality. In speaking to filmmaker Yoruba Richen, who has made a documentary about *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (the starting point for Farrelly's *Green Book*, published between 1936 and 1966), interviewer Aaron Ross Coleman asked what call to action—in response to Farrelly's film—Richen envisioned, "whether it's supporting black-owned businesses or maybe a call for more investment in them?" And Richen replied, "I would say, support black-owned businesses, support black stories, let's change the narratives. It's about high time. Let's change the narrative and take control of our own image and representation."

Identity politics is an immense and profitable industry. A substantial social stratum has a heavy investment in it. The lives and careers of thousands of people are thoroughly bound up with it. What would be left of a filmmaker like Spike Lee or a critic like Chang if racial and gender politics were removed? Very little.

Aside from their selfishness and ambition, these wealthy social layers, including upper middle class and bourgeois African Americans, are increasingly terrified of a unified movement of workers from below because it threatens their class position and privileges. To divide the working class along racial, ethnic and gender lines is essential for the defense of American capitalism. (It is no accident that David Duke, the former KKK leader, has expressed admiration for Spike Lee and that white supremacists found much to praise in *Black Panther*. Racialism and chauvinism are the province of the far right.)

Chang's comment was so egregious that it provoked an angry response. The *LA Times* was obliged to post some of the replies in "Criticism of 'Green Book's' Oscar win by The Times' Justin Chang sparks strong reader reaction" (February 28).

One reader commented, "Just as Justin Chang said I would, I take offense at his review of the best picture Oscar winner, 'Green Book.' 'Reasonable disagreement'? No, it was a hatchet job; the film was great." A second wrote, "I find this 'Green Book' backlash ridiculous. This is a film about two men, opposites, who through a dangerous journey found friendship and grew to have each other's backs. They changed each other's lives on countless levels." A third asked, "Must we also loathe such films as 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'Glory' because of the sin of a white perspective?" One reader observed, "As an African American, I was offended by the presumption that only black audiences can take the moral high road on matters of race. Really? Folly, arrogance and cruelty come in all colors. Don't tell us what is white and what is black."

A number of prominent figures, some of whom actually knew Don Shirley, also responded positively and powerfully to *Green Book*.

In December, legendary African American music producer Quincy Jones addressed the audience at a screening of Farrelly's film in Los Angeles. According to *Deadline*, Jones said, "I hope that you all enjoyed this very special film about friendship and the power of music to bring people together ... I had the pleasure of being acquainted with Don Shirley while I was working as an arranger in New York in the '50s, and he was without question one of America's greatest pianists ... as skilled a musician as Leonard Bernstein or Van Cliburn. ... So it is wonderful that his story is finally being told and celebrated. Mahershala [Ali], you did an absolutely fantastic job playing him, and I think yours and Viggo's [Mortensen] performances will go down as one of the great friendships captured on film."

Deadline reported that Jones added, "I did that 'Chitlin Circuit' tour through the South when I was with the Lionel Hampton band, and let me tell you ... it was no picnic. And we were a band. I can't imagine what it would have been like to do it alone with just a driver. So Peter [Farrelly, the film's director-writer], thank you for telling this story of our country's not-so-distant history and capturing on film the ties that can bind us when we spend time listening, talking and living with one another."

More recently, 92-year-old Harry Belafonte, the singer, songwriter and actor, answered critics of the film. (Significantly, Belafonte has a role in Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*.) In an email, he commented, "My wife Pamela and I just finished watching *Green Book* and although I don't usually do this, I am compelled to drop this note to thank the filmmakers for having made this film for us all to see. I knew Don Shirley, and, in fact, had an office across the street from his at Carnegie Hall, and I experienced much of what he did at the same time. This movie is accurate, it is true, and it's a wonderful movie that everyone should see.

"The few people who appear to be objecting to the film's depiction of the time and the man are dead wrong, and, if the basis of their resentment stems from it having been written and/or directed by someone who isn't African American, I disagree with them even more. There are many perspectives from which to tell the same story and all can be true.

"I personally thank the filmmakers for having told this important story from a very different lens, one no less compelling than any other.

"So again, I say to the filmmakers, thank you, and congratulations."

In a piece in the *Hollywood Reporter* ("Why the 'Green Book' Controversies Don't Matter," January 14), basketball great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar defended the film against its racist critics. As his final argument, he took up "the question of whether the story should have been told by three white men: director and co-writer Peter Farrelly, Nick Vallelonga (Tony's son) and co-producer Brian Currie. Artistically, it shouldn't make a difference. A good artist must be able to re-create characters who are different than themselves. While I'm aware that blacks in the film industry need greater representation—and I strongly advocate for them—I'm also aware that this was a passion project that might not have been made if not for the commitment of these men."

At an event in New York City in January, a group of Don Shirley's friends strongly defended the film. Indiewire, before it discovered how "reprehensible" the film was, reported, for example, that former friend and piano student "Michael Kappeyne told the crowd, 'I believe I speak for all of [his friends] when I say that this has been a wonderful experience, and it's a wonderful, wonderful movie for so many reasons.' ... Choking up, he continued, 'We are really thrilled with Dr. Shirley's portrayal, because we think it's right on the money, we feel the dignity, we feel the wariness, we feel some of the hidden anger, of which he had a lot, but we also feel the presence and generosity of spirit that he had towards all of us, and he helped several of us and changed our lives.'"

The social and cultural divide is great in America, and, as the class struggle intensifies, it is only becoming greater.

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