

Make Her Stop!

By Kathleen Watt

Response to online article by Cintra Wilson: "Somebody Make It Stop!" Salon.com

CINTRA WILSON IS ONE WACKY GAL, who has a lot to say and loves the sound of herself saying it. It's not music to my ears, but I said that about Sondheim (too many words), and prepared-pianist John Cage, whose seminal contribution to the history of music was four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence (he called that masterpiece...uh...4'33"). I've learned to appreciate them like late-period Pollak and early Clash...so I'm willing to wait for Wilson's point. She does have one, I think, but it's messy. It's either, "We're all Americans together," or "Our black friends are just as excellent at being overprivileged celebrity fuckwads as anybody else." My guess is that the one (your choice) is too sacred to be funny, so she makes the other, which is just as true. But she makes a few other points as well, in spite of herself.

For example, this chick is white—betcha—and here's why I say that. She skewers Tom Cruise—and other celebs-of-no-color—upon stiletto metaphors like a crazed dominatrix. Delicious. But when she comes to bashing the black bitches, she shrinks somewhat from the same exuberance. White chicks do this. Boo, hiss.

Halle Berry is about as white as you can get and still be black, but Ms Berry weeps as she anoints herself Saint Joan D'ark (*get it?*), accepting the Oscar for Every Black Woman Everywhere Ever. Of course this is better than what happened to Lena (Horne), but did you see what she won it for? We need Ms Wilson to *howl*. Come on! Halle's a *celebrity!* This was a *career move*—no, not the movie—the Oscar meltdown! Wilson then seems to struggle with Whoopi Goldberg as Earth Mother, suggesting wanly that she was merely unfunny. That's *it?* And, begging pardon, when would a lifetime achievement award for Sidney Poitier *not* be overdue? No special points to Wilson for this tap on the wrist. But when she flays White Guys Randy Newman, Sting, and Diane Warren in the music category, Wilson unleashes a rapier wit. Her sendup of that (Celt) Enya's toilet paper track is a lacerating beauty.

Too, Ms Wilson misapprehends the simple cause/effect relationship exposed here. "Our" movie actors and actresses of color don't need more *Oscars*. They need more *work*. There has to be more *work*—more opportunity to hone the chops along the way to the really big show, more chances to *get* good. In the movies and media, where the ebb and flow of new material never stops, I ask you—where is the *work* for actors and actresses of color, work that *leads* to Oscar-worthy roles, which summon Oscar-

winning performances? Screen actresses “of a certain age,” of every color, have always complained about a dearth of good material. But the scandal of impenetrable color barriers in the American screen industry still has not been breached.

Remember Bette Midler’s *Mud Will Be Flung Tonight*, back in the late eighties? “...And into the faces of some of your favorites!” crowed the globally acknowledged master of this brand of bath-house bad-mouth. That’s the beauty of it. That’s what makes it trustworthy, and viable, and that’s what Wilson has down pat—the absolute democracy of it. It’s fun to feel it rippling irreverently along, like a little *Lambert, Hendrix and Ross* across the page.

But after awhile, errant pitches begin to rankle, and eventually the unconscious effort to perfect them is exhausting. Like an evening with a fiddler whose fretting is forever a quarter-tone flat. By the time she wraps it up, Wilson has too often left me wondering where she comes down on matters she brings up. For example, after she’s laid down a nice carpet of expository abuse, she says “...the Academy sensed this attitude...” and I’m at a loss. Which attitude? That We, the “ass-licked and brainwashed” People, “watch and enjoy?” Or that we don’t? Or that we do and don’t like to? Or wouldn’t if we didn’t have to? Wilson’s point of view, like mine here, gets badly tangled up in her web of words. Alas, she betrays herself in the very epistemology of her own dizzy discourse. When she repeats herself on issues like “treating our citizens of color like they are a separate people from us...” I’m wondering just who the “us” is that the “they” are separate from? Who the heck is Wilson, in this piece, and who the heck are we, the people? The crackers or the coons? The producers or the popcorn proletariat sitting in the dark? You know, those primped and pimped nominees in every category emoting into the camera for the viewers at home—they’re People too, as we’ve heard them protest. For whom does Cintra speak?

Ms Wilson is too skilled at the multitasking turn of phrase (“...gilding the gilded lily made of gold, again...”) to make mistakes in content. But she may have her own voice too much in her own ears. How can a writer who fires off razzle-dazzle like “Mach-5 mega-humorlessness” also stoop to a cliché like “steely resolve”—in the same sentence—without meaning something by it? But—and maybe it’s just me—I didn’t get it. She is deft at interweaving screen reference after trusty screen reference (she would like to “...eat Owen Wilson, with fava beans and a nice Chianti...”), and even complicated psychosocial issues (how about that riff on Hollywood bulimia!). But returning to the top of the piece only recalls missteps that turn out to be even less forgivable on rereading.

For example, as Wilson begins her wind-up, she tells us that she “...never questioned the Oscars before...” Forgive me, but *that’s* just not believable. The Academy has *always* “simultaneously lauded and robbed.” To some extent that’s the consequence of making a contest of any art or craft. What I’m saying is, ‘twas ever thus. But serving herself with this setup at the outset—“I never questioned the Oscars before”—Wilson actually breaks faith with her readers just as she begins. That’s unfortunate, and deadly, for a verbal vamp of her sass and agility, because as much as we’d like to play with her in this wordy romp, we do not want to *be* played. Nor does it strengthen her soberest point, which comes much later, that the Oscars are “obscenely superfluous,” and that the screen industry itself holds the power to convince us that they are not.

One demonstrable fact is that we Americans—all of us—before *and* after September 11, are among the elite on this Earth. Almost *everything* in our culture is supersized to obscene excess—this year merely more irrelevantly than usual—and we, the people, are all but inured to it, the better to be lured into the collective dark of Hollywood moviemakers.

But, you know—I love the movies. And Ms Wilson has asked some piercing questions (“exactly how much are we supposed to adore good actors?”), the answers to which we might seek in vain—except as they reside in the tantalizing good sense of this suggestion from Ms. Wilson: “Let’s just bump up with this consciousness and be done with it.” In the zany mirror Ms Wilson holds up to us, it’s easier to see that we all have a lot of really important things to attend to.

After the movie.