



Clockwise from far left: Thandie Newton with Matt Dillon in Crash; David Harewood; Marianne Jean-Baptiste in Without a Trace; Chiwetel Ejiofor (left) with Don Cheadle in Talk to Me

Our best black actors must go to the US to get good roles. Their only awards ceremony is almost ignored by Britain's media. Actor **David Harewood**, nominated in next week's 'black Baftas', wonders if things will ever improve

Parts and minds

This coming Monday, some of Britain's greatest black actors will tread the red carpet for the fifth annual Screen Nation awards. Founded by the Ghanaian producer Charles Thompson in 2002, the so-called "black Baftas" are the one time of year when such black talent gathers under one roof to celebrate its success. And yet, unlike other awards in this country, Screen Nation seldom gets a mention in the press. Other than those it seeks to recognise, few people even know that it exists.

Does that really matter, I have been asked. After all, black Britons such as Thandie Newton and Chiwetel Ejiofor have such high profiles internationally that no one can have any doubt about the strength of our home-grown talent.

Yes, it does matter. Back in Britain, TV and film producers and directors are still nervous about black actors in leading roles. Ask anyone in the street to name five American black actors and they can do it; but ask them to name five British counterparts and they will be stuck. That is not because the talent does not exist, but because we just don't get that exposure here.

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It is only when they go to the US that actors such as Newton and Ejiofor get the parts, and therefore the acclaim, they deserve. Whether it is Marianne Jean-Baptiste as Vivian Johnson in *Without a Trace*, Lennie James in *Jericho*, or Idris Elba as Russell "Stringer" Bell in *The Wire*, black Britons seem to get better parts over there, even on the small screen.

Americans simply seem to be more comfortable with black actors in leading roles, and with the whole concept of "generic" parts in which race is not an issue. Dennis Haysbert and Morgan Freeman have both played the American president, while Haysbert is now the leader of a special operations unit in the new David Mamet drama *The Unit*. In *Ugly Betty*, Vanessa Williams is getting rave reviews as a scheming magazine executive.

I have been very fortunate in my career in Britain, in that I have managed to play plenty of parts that were not conceived specifically for a black actor. I am not entirely alone in this – think of Freema Agyeman as Doctor Who's sidekick Martha Jones, for example, or first Adrian Lester and now Ashley Walters in *Hustle* – but many of my peers have struggled in this respect. To get roles with authority and weight still seems to be extremely difficult. All too often, black actors

are only seen fit to be secondary characters: "the best friend", say, or "the good cop". I think I have played more black policemen than there are black policemen. And these are not the kind of roles that get you noticed.

By contrast, when I was in America last year for the premiere of *Blood Diamond*, I was amazed at the variety and scope of some of the castings I was going into. Casting directors told me openly that no new American television series gets the green light without at least two or three leading ethnic minority roles. If nothing else, in that melting pot of a country it makes business sense to have a cast in which the audience can recognise itself.

That might also be true of multicultural Britain, of course. Lots of black people are suddenly watching formula one motor racing because of Lewis Hamilton; if film and television executives were braver in their casting, perhaps they would bring a new audience to their programmes.

Maybe I am hoping for too much, but I have always felt that television and film have a responsibility to be diverse, uplifting and inclusive. At times it feels as if our film industry is at least 10 or 15 years behind America's.

It is not just showbusiness, of course. Take

Moira Stuart, who earlier this year lost her regular slot at the BBC after more than a quarter of a century on our screens. Here is a woman with whom we have all grown up, a gifted journalist and presenter, someone we all know and love. Can broadcasters really say that there are enough black women of her age on the television? Meanwhile, countless "celebrities" get a little bit of fame on *Big Brother* and are then given their own shows.

Without events such as Screen Nation, much of the work done by black British people in film and television would go unnoticed. Do awards like these ghettoise black actors, or somehow relegate them? Of course not. If I win a prize on Monday evening, I will accept it with just as much pride as if I had been given a Bafta or an Oscar ●

David Harewood has been nominated in the Best Male Performance in Film category for his part in *Blood Diamond*. The Screen Nation Awards will be broadcast on Sky Movies Drama on October 29 and Sky Movies Indie on November 2. Harewood was speaking to Hannah Pool.