

1960s Period Piece Sparks Race Discussion

By Kevin Sanson

3-4 minutes

In light of the awards season hype surrounding Viola Davis' performance in [The Help](#), critics once again are asking important questions about the place of race in the entertainment business.

An audience favorite (and a strong awards-contender itself), *The Help* has attracted criticisms for whitewashing the histories and experiences of the black domestic servants it purports to tell.

You can find particularly good write-ups about the film [here](#), [here](#), and for a slightly different take, [here](#). Davis plays one of the maids, and she provides the film's voiceover narration.

A central [ambivalence](#) for many critics centers on the troubling paradox actors like Davis face when taking on a role imbued with such great historical baggage. A job is, after all, a job, but what happens when some critics perceive that job to be a troubling racial stereotype? At the 2 minute mark, Tavis Smiley puts the question to Davis and co-star Octavia Spencer:

Davis has discussed openly her initial [hesitation](#) to play the

character but says she ultimately identified with the role's emotional complexity. Her [comments](#) qualify what she perceives as an eagerness among critics to dismiss the role based on the character's occupation alone. As one [critic](#) has noted, this tension "makes criticizing the movie in any manner like navigating a minefield."

Yet, interest in *The Help* has prompted a much larger conversation about the experience of non-white actors in Hollywood. In press for the film, Davis has been vocal about the [limited roles](#) available for black actors. [Reactions](#) to a recent [discussion](#) among Oscar contenders have drawn significant attention to the topic as well. More recently, the lack of diversity among Oscar voters has found its way into the [conversation](#).

Critics also have wondered whether the film's success might mark a turning point in the industry's assumptions about "black films," an explicit invocation in recent interviews with George Lucas and Spike Lee. Both filmmakers responded to the optimism with lament. Discussing his experience making the all-black cast [Red Tails](#) with [The Daily Show](#) and [USA Today](#), Lucas said studios are reluctant to finance movies with all-black casts because they perceive them as commercial risks. Similarly, Lee told [The Hollywood Reporter](#) that studios "don't know how to market [all-black cast films because] they have no black people in the marketing departments." Even the [fallout](#) over Lee's remarks has drawn comparisons to *The Help*, confirming once again the film's status as a current touchstone in the debate about race in Hollywood.