



RESPONSE TO BARRY AVRICH'S "IT DOESN'T MATTER" STATEMENT

Thursday, April 7, 2022 - Toronto, ON - Upon winning the Canadian Screen Award for Best Direction in a Documentary for “Oscar Peterson: Black + White” on Monday, director Barry Avrich stated in his acceptance speech, “There are so many Black stories in Canada that need to be told. It doesn't matter who tells them, we just need to tell them.” The Black Screen Office (BSO) vehemently disagrees with this assertion that the teller of Black Canadian stories does not matter.

“The BSO congratulates Barry Avrich for his CSA win, but we are deeply disturbed that he would use this as a platform to make such a self-serving point in his acceptance speech,” says Jennifer Holness, Chair of the Board of Directors of the BSO. “Mr. Avrich, I'd like to emphatically let you know that it does matter. Until recently, we Black filmmakers have faced massive systemic and structural bias that allowed very few of us to make work, never mind to obtain the access and craftsmanship you have gotten over your career. Opportunities are finally opening up for us to tell our stories, and we must be given the support and funding to do this work.”

In the BSO's recent ground-breaking research into the importance of “being seen” for Black audiences and industry professionals, the subject of telling stories from outside one's community was revealed to be an incredibly complex topic with multiple firmly held opinions—far from Mr. Avrich's “it doesn't matter” position. Can non-Black people tell Black stories? “We would prefer not,” says Holness. “At least not without our involvement in a significant and meaningful way. It is your privilege and supreme disrespect of our history in this industry that would allow you to make such a statement. It also very cleverly weaponizes the non-Black community, who are seeing avenues open up around funding for Black and diverse stories, to jump in now that this work is being sought out.”

At a time when funding support is finally being allocated to tell these stories, Mr. Avrich deliberately seeks to minimize Black creators' narrative agency over our own stories. His comment encourages others to gatekeep our voices, perpetuates the erasure of Black storytelling and denies Black creators opportunities to be celebrated as Mr. Arvich himself has been.

It is true there is no shortage of important and engrossing Black Canadian stories. There is also no shortage of Black storytellers with the skills to compellingly present those stories. What is in short supply, however, are opportunities for Black creators to bring their works to the mainstream. “It's disheartening that at this pivotal moment when real change is occurring, with funders and institutions finally invested in supporting Black content creators, Mr. Avrich seeks to undermine this movement,” adds Holness. “It is a movement, Mr. Avrich, and you are on the wrong side of history because who gets to tell our story is as vital as the story itself.”

Black Screen Office, Board of Directors

About Black Screen Office (BSO)

BSO's goals are to make Canada's screen industries' practices and policies equitable and free of anti-Black racism; to work collaboratively with decision-makers to develop tools and strategies that enable system-level engagement and accountability; and to empower Black Canadians working within the screen industries to thrive and share their stories. For more information, visit <https://www.bso-ben.ca/>

For more information:

Joan Jenkinson | Black Screen Office | info@bso-ben.ca

