

David Oyelowo: 'Nowhere on Earth has been better at covering up racism than Great Britain'

The actor is tired of talking about race, but the trolling of his latest film shows why he still has to. He talks religion, the secret of his happy marriage – and why he worried he had failed the legacy of Martin Luther King



David Oyelowo: 'I'm jealous of my peers – Benedict Cumberbatch never has to talk about his race.'

By Simon Hattenstone
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David Oyelowo is tired of talking about racism. After all, he has spent a professional lifetime doing so – not surprisingly, as this has been the focus of many of his films. So it was with some relief that he found himself starring in an escapist children's movie that has nothing to do with it. Yet two months before its release, *Come Away* hit the headlines – as a racism story.

Come Away is a fantasy about a fantasy; the whimsical tale of parents bringing up young children who just happen to be Peter Pan and Alice from Wonderland. Oyelowo plays the father, while Angelina Jolie plays the mother. Astonishingly, the fact that Alice and Peter are mixed-race has fuelled a campaign against the film.

In October, it was reported that IMDb, the online database of film information, had taken down user ratings for *Come Away* after it had been “review-bombed” – a group of people had left negative feedback to artificially lower its ratings. Many films that get review-bombed are about race or gender and feature non-white or female leads.

Oyelowo is appalled but not surprised. What type of things were the bombers saying? “The comment I read that made me realise I had to call the IMDb website to make them aware that we were being subjected to these racist comments was: ‘Here we go again – Hollywood seeking to erase our whiteness.’”



With Jordan A Nash in *Come Away*.

The irony is, Oyelowo says, these people are treating Peter Pan and Alice as if they were historical figures. “This is around a story that is fictional, fantasy and a fairytale.” His voice rises in disbelief at the madness of assuming Peter or Alice have to be white. “You just put your hands up and say OK, this is why people have a problem with John Boyega being a stormtrooper or with Halle Bailey being cast as the mermaid in *The Little Mermaid*. This is why an all-female version of Ghostbusters is a threat to certain men because it’s an encroachment on what they deem to be their territory.” All the movies he mentions were review-bombed.

This wasn’t the first of Oyelowo’s films to be attacked. *A United Kingdom* is a powerful biopic, released in 2016, about Seretse Khama, who became king of the British protectorate Bechuanaland (which became Botswana) at the age of four, then went on to renounce his throne for the love of a white woman. Khama eventually became Botswana’s first president in 1966. As well as the inter-racial relationship, Oyelowo believes there was something else that made the film a target. “You’re seeing an aspirational black character, someone you might admire, someone your young child might look at and say: I want to be like them. Seventy-five per cent of the comments we got on our Facebook page for that film were racist and Fox Searchlight had to take the page down.”

Oyelowo, aged 44, is at home in the San Fernando valley of Los Angeles when we Zoom. The actor, who was born in England to Nigerian parents, has lived here for 13

years. His family – wife, Jess, and four children – are now naturalised Americans, and Oyelowo’s accent has morphed into an urbane transatlantic hybrid. He shows me around his office. It wouldn’t be much of a challenge if you were playing *Through the Keyhole*. There are posters from his films (*Come Away*, *Selma*, *Gringo and Don’t Let Go*) and one from a Royal Shakespeare Company theatre production of *Henry VI*. He was 24, only two years out of drama school, when he became the first black actor to be cast as a king in a major production of Shakespeare.

He made his name in the BBC spy series *Spooks*, and is a quietly remarkable actor. He inhabits his characters profoundly and with subtlety. Oyelowo has given so many fine performances – unravelling army veteran Peter Snowden in one-man movie *Nightingale*; supercilious reporter Yardley Acheman in *The Paperboy*; impassioned chess-teacher Robert Katende in *Queen of Katwe*, Khama in *A United Kingdom*. Then there is his note-perfect Martin Luther King in 2014’s *Selma*, the historical drama about the voting-rights marches in the US south.



With Rosamund Pike in A United Kingdom.

Even more amazing than his performance was the fact that he didn’t win an Oscar for the role. How did he feel when he heard he hadn’t even been nominated? “I felt I had failed the legacy of Dr King.” Did you swear? “No, I did not. Maybe in my head. I went into my walk-in closet and sat on the floor for a while.”

Is it true he wasn’t nominated for an Oscar because he was wearing an “I can’t breathe” T-shirt at *Selma*’s premiere? “There is no way of us knowing whether us protesting the murder of Eric Garner had a discernible impact on the film in terms of the Oscars,” he says. “But we did have incoming phone calls to our producers saying: ‘What the hell are they doing stirring shit?’ And [one Academy member] was bold enough to say that to one of the trade papers.”

His non-nomination (along with the snubbing of Ava DuVernay in the best director category, and the fact that all 20 acting nominations went to white actors) led to the

foundings of the influential #OscarsSoWhite protest movement. Oyelowo has been one of its beneficiaries. “I became an executive member of the Academy and have had a massive hand in the wave of black and brown people who have now been admitted to the Academy.” This has irrevocably changed the way the Academy votes, he says. “I have no doubt that *Get Out* and *BlacKkKlansman* and *Black Panther* and many other films that have now been celebrated may have also been marginalised.”

Like King, Oyelowo was raised in the baptist church. He was born in Oxford, spent his early years in south London and moved with his family to Lagos at the age of six. Oyelowo descends from a regional royal family, but he has often compared being a Nigerian prince to being prince of Islington, where the family lived on their return to the UK when he was 14. His father was treated like anything but royalty in England. “He was subjected to statements like: ‘Go back to where you came from.’ He was spat at and had hot coffee poured on him.”

Britain might be more diverse than it used to be, Oyelowo says, but he’s not convinced it’s less racist. “My brother, who is a healthcare professional in the UK, was on the train not long after the Brexit decision and that exact phrase was used to him on the tube. ‘Go back to where you came from.’ So no one can tell me Brexit wasn’t at least in part about race.”



As Martin Luther King in *Selma*.

At school Oyelowo was bullied for being a swot – other black students called him a coconut. His faith kept him going throughout. He joined a drama group because he fancied a girl, and that’s where he met Jess, also an actor (she has featured in a number of his films) and born-again Christian. By the time he was 20 and at drama school, they were engaged. They told friends that they would not have sex with each other till they married two years later. Drama schools are not renowned for restraint, I say – did

your fellow students think you were a strange couple? “Absolutely. There was utter bemusement. I had a friend who mocked me so mercilessly. He would shout from across the set: ‘You going to take her off and pop her cherry, are you?’ Just the most awful things. But yes, Jess and I were virgins when we got married. It’s tied to our faith, but it’s also who we are, and what we connected over.”

They promised each other they would never be apart for more than two weeks because they had seen too much “divorce and dysfunction” in the acting world. “So much we have done in our life together was mocked. And to be perfectly frank we’re having the last laugh.” In what way? “I love my wife even more than I did 24 years ago. Our marriage is strong ... because of some of the foundational choices we made early on.” He has always insisted on the two-week rule being written into his contracts, and he says it has started a trend. “We’ve seen other people emulate that, which is the greatest compliment they can pay us.”

Oyelowo describes himself as a missionary. “I have an incredible platform in telling stories,” he says. “Jesus used parables consistently to make his point. He was a storyteller. I’m not here to proselytise Christ and be a preacher in that sense, but I do like to think of myself as a bringer of good news.” This does not mean saccharine narratives, he insists. “The Bible is a violent, R-rated book, not a Disney sort of book. I like to think I’m bringing the good news, the redemptive news in narratives that do not shy away from darkness and reality.”

Oyelowo has always believed that to be a successful missionary he has to be proactive. So he moved to the US with the family in 2007 because he thought there were more opportunities for a black actor. Even with Donald Trump in power, he would take the US over Britain. “Nowhere on earth has been better at covering up racism in my opinion than Great Britain. The thing I like about living in America is that racism comes at you head on. In the UK it sneaks up behind you. I constantly came up against the old boys’ network in the UK – this Oxbridge clique that I wasn’t a part of and felt patronised by. Here the class system is money and success. If you succeed, people will invite you in, not because they are so egalitarian but they are so scared of missing out on something.”

For Oyelowo, the fight for diversity does not end with race. Few big-name actors have worked with as many female directors, from Brenda Chapman (*Come Away*) and Amma Asante (*A United Kingdom*), to Mira Nair (*Queen of Katwe*) and DuVernay. “Women get to the emotion of the film a lot quicker.” He pauses. “I hope that doesn’t sound in any way diminishing of what women bring, but if my job as an actor is to hold a mirror up to humanity, a huge part of that is the emotion of the character, and I want a director who is unafraid of looking at the emotion.”

Oyelowo has started producing, directing and writing in recent years to ensure he gets to tell the stories he thinks need to be heard. As a producer on *Come Away*, he convinced Jolie to take the part. His directing debut, *The Water Man*, which premiered at the Toronto film festival in September, is a family adventure that nods to Spielberg. And he is set to star in and produce an adaptation of the former Guardian journalist Gary Younge’s portrait of gun violence, *Another Day in the Death of America*.



The Water Man.

Five years ago he claimed he could only get a lead role in a studio movie if Ryan Gosling couldn't play it. Is that still true? He thinks about it, and smiles. "That has changed. Come Away is evidence of that."

Our time is up, but Oyelowo continues talking. He says he dreads the thought of seeing another interview with him banging on about racism. "But I recognise the need to still talk about it because I am standing on the shoulders of others who were denied the chance. I'm jealous of my peers. Benedict Cumberbatch never has to talk about his race, neither does Tom Hardy." Ah, but they have to talk about their poshness, I say. "I feel so bad for them having to talk about their poshness!" He laughs. "Look, the day I know I don't have to talk about racism is the day I'll know we have real progress."