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'A place for us': Why Ariana DeBose's Oscar win is a major victory for LGBTQ community



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Wanda Sykes promised us – and therefore me, specifically – a gay Oscars show. And we certainly got a welcome gay-as-can-be moment on the Oscars stage.

Ariana DeBose capped a stunning awards season by winning the best supporting actress award for her role as Anita in "West Side Story" – becoming the first openly queer Afro-Latina to win an acting Oscar.

"Now you see why, that Anita says, 'I want to be in America,' because even in this weary world that we live in, dreams do come true," DeBose said in her acceptance speech. "And that's really a heartening thing right now."

"Heartening," yes – and also necessary. LGBTQ people around the country are fighting for equitable treatment and opportunity not just in media, but in health care, politics and especially education.

More: Oscars 2022: 'CODA' wins best picture, Will Smith and Jessica Chastain take acting honors

The queer community in the U.S. is under attack. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on Monday signed the state's "Parental Rights in Education" into law, blocking public school teachers from discussing sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade and allowing only "age appropriate" instruction for other grades. It's one of many similar pieces of legislation brewing around the country.

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"We're going to have a great night tonight. And for you people in Florida, we're going to have a gay night," Sykes, who is a lesbian, said at the top of the Oscars show, directly mocking Florida's legislation. Sykes' co-hosts Amy Schumer and Regina Hall echoed her, saying "gay, gay, gay."

While saying "gay" in solidarity is certainly welcome, it wouldn't have been enough to call this night any kind of gay success if a queer person didn't win. I needed to feel *seen*, with a capital "S."

Hollywood has no shortage of LGBTQ actors, but rarely do they receive acting Oscar nominations. DeBose and Kristen Stewart (for "Spencer") made history as two out queer nominees in the same year – a watershed moment for LGBTQ inclusion. But Ian McKellen is still the only out gay male actor ever nominated for an Oscar.

Rock Hudson was nominated for best actor in 1957, but remained closeted until he died in 1985 of AIDS; two-time Oscar winner Kevin Spacey announced he was living as a gay man only after he was accused of sexually harassing a teenage boy; and Jodie Foster is still the only best actress winner to come out (and years after her win, at that).

'Love will make you do crazy things': Will Smith apologizes to Oscars after hitting Chris Rock onstage: 'Love will make you do crazy things'

Yes, that happened: The Fresh Prince is crowned: Will Smith wins best actor on an infamous Oscar night

DeBose made sure to champion the community, not taking her privileged platform for granted in a riveting, revolutionary acceptance speech.

"Imagine this little girl in the back seat of a white Ford Focus," DeBose said. "Look into her eyes, you see a queer, openly queer woman of color and Afro-Latina who found her strength in life through art. And that's what I believe we're here to celebrate."

She closed by invoking lyrics to "Somewhere" from "West Side Story": "To anybody who has ever questioned your identity ever, ever, ever or find yourself living in the gray spaces, I promise you this: There is indeed a place for us."

"Another first has fallen," Darnell Hunt, dean of social sciences at UCLA and author of the Hollywood Diversity Report, says of the win.

I couldn't help but feel the grand, gay gravity of the moment. DeBose was speaking, yes, but she channeled the queer joy, heartbreak and sacrifice from generations past. Tears welled in my eyes. Gay person to gay person. Human to human.

And not just for me, but for all the queer children and their parents who may be worried about their child's anti-LGBTQ education. A place for *us*, indeed.

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In case you missed: Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill sparked national backlash. But more legislation is brewing.

GLAAD's president and CEO, Sarah Kate Ellis, noted the importance of DeBose's words in a statement: "She sent a beautiful and timely message to LGBTQ young people. I hope LGBTQ youth around the world saw her win, heard her speak and recognize that they too should dream big."

DeBose has been an outspoken advocate for her communities.

"This is the greatest amount of visibility I know I've personally ever had and (for) the communities I belong to it's the most visibility some of those communities have had in a long while," DeBose told USA TODAY on the red carpet. "For all the things we have to work on, we've taken some beautiful steps forward, and I celebrate that tonight."

And it wasn't the only first of the night: Troy Kotsur took home the best supporting actor award for "CODA," becoming the first male deaf actor to win an Oscar, and the first actor since his co-star, Marlee Matlin, won for "Children of a Lesser God" in 1987. And Yvett Merino became the first Latina to win for animated feature, for "Encanto."

All eyes remain on the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences – and all of Hollywood, really – to improve on its diversity efforts. This year's nominations left industry watchers skeptical, if hopeful. (Four Black actors earned acting nominations this year, but that's down from a historic nine people of color in 2021.)

Since the #OscarsSoWhite fiasco of 2015 and subsequent years of nominations that brought outrage, the academy has worked to diversify its membership to include more women and people of color.

Oscars best dressed: Shirtless Timothée Chalamet and shiny Zendaya stun on the red carpet

'Brave enough to be out in Hollywood': What Ariana DeBose, Kristen Stewart's Oscar nods mean

But increasing quotas can't solve Hollywood's inclusion problem alone. Diversity, equity and inclusion "is not just about increasing numbers or meeting a quota, but it's about infusing the concept of belonging and making those who have traditionally been excluded, feel welcome and respected in all aspects of a program," says employment lawyer and mediator Angela Reddock-Wright.

As "Encanto" star Stephanie Beatriz noted on the red carpet to E!'s host Laverne Cox: "There should be more people like us inhabiting the space. People of color, queer people, standing here and representing all of us. Because we all enjoy the movies."

Read that back: Because we *all* enjoy the movies.

If "there is indeed a place for us," she said, that statement should resonate each Oscars year.

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