

Feb. 24, 2006

Show Time

By Beverly Gray

It was a great moment, as winning usually is. Director Jonathan X remembers vividly when his PBS series, "Tavis Smiley," was named outstanding TV news, talk or information program at the 2005 NAACP Image Awards. Mounting the stage with the rest of the show's creative team and taking a bow, he let others do the talking. Giddy — and perhaps a bit stunned — the helmer recalls "(waving) as I walked off, hoping not to fall (off the stage)." Little did X know at the time that the following year, he would be directing the very show that had honored his program.

On Saturday, the helmer might be physically far removed from the 37th annual NAACP Image Awards as he sits in the control truck, monitoring the every move of presenters and nominees in the cavernous Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, but in reality, he'll be in the thick of things, a mere TV monitor away, as he puts his skills toward "capturing the energy and emotion of the event" for TV audiences. (The ceremony airs March 3 on Fox.) It's all about the ability to be spontaneous, he says: "You say a prayer — and go for it."

"Going for it" has never been a problem for the Image Awards, and in fact, it has evolved nicely over the past 38 years. When the ceremony began in 1967, motion picture actors and supporting players were lumped together in the same category. Even so, there weren't enough nominees to fill out the roster. Today, there's no shortage of talented performers to nominate, both male and female. And in the spirit of the Image Awards' continued growth, three directing categories have been added to the mix for the first time: outstanding directing in a dramatic series, comedy series and feature film/TV movie. Plans are in the works for writers, beginning with the 2007 show, to be recognized as well.

The evening promises to be jam-packed with tributes, heartfelt acceptance speeches and red-hot musical performances. The Neville Brothers will receive the Chairman's Award from NAACP chairman Julian Bond, then participate in a New Orleans-style musical extravaganza; Susan Taylor, editorial director of Essence magazine, will be presented with the President's Award; and singer/social activist Carlos Santana will be inducted into the NAACP Image Awards Hall of Fame.

Oscar-winning actor Cuba Gooding Jr. steps in for hosting duties. Vicangelo Bulluck, Image Awards executive producer and executive director of the NAACP Hollywood Bureau, praises Gooding for being "quick on his feet," as well as "thoughtful and intelligent." These qualities should help Gooding steer a show that, while not pounding a political message, still must respond to timely matters like the effect of Hurricane Katrina on the black community. This year's show also will feature an especially poignant "in memoriam" segment, dedicated to such recently departed luminaries as civil rights activist Rosa Parks, playwright August Wilson, comedian Richard Pryor, singer Lou Rawls, tap-dancing legend Fayard Nicholas and Coretta Scott King, widow

of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Presenters include Chris "Ludacris" Bridges, Nick Cannon, Kimberly Elise, Donald Faison, Omar Gooding, comic Dick Gregory, Kerry Washington and Lynn Whitfield. Also slated to appear are singer Toni Braxton and Star Jones Reynolds, along with Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

The fact that the Shrine offers 5,000 seats, in contrast to 2,000 at last year's venue, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, allows this year's event to be more inclusive than in years past, with many more seats available to NAACP members.

Production designer Bruce Ryan, the stage and TV veteran who has been responsible for the total look of the show for the past 14 years, is thrilled that the Shrine boasts ample backstage facilities and a stage double the size of the one found at the Pavilion. He's eager to deck it out in "surfaces and textures that are real and honest" — which, to Ryan, means the strategic use of wood, stone and marble — reflecting in a tangible way what the Image Awards promote: good images, values and authenticity.

He has worked his share of awards events, but Ryan insists the Image Awards ceremony is special. He enjoys the obvious sincerity that marks the giving and receiving of the evening's various honors. "This is always one of the most emotional and meaningful awards shows because it comes from the community," he says.