



The “All Black Cast” Pages

Segregated Cinema - “Race Pictures” from the Hidden Hollywood

When moving pictures first became a popular entertainment in America, African-Americans were as excluded from that field as from most others. Blacks couldn't get into the business end, and the roles for actors were few and invariably insulting. So pioneering black entrepreneurs, such as author-director Oscar Micheaux, began forming their own production & distribution companies, making films with entirely African-American casts & crews aimed at exclusively black audiences. Hundreds of these “race movies” were made in the silent period, mostly amateurish and with budgets that wouldn't buy a dinner at a four-star restaurant. But since they were free from the Hollywood system and rarely even noticed by the critics, these films could explore cutting social and racial issues that major studios would never touch. More importantly, they were the only films in which African-American audiences could see members of their race portrayed as intelligent and heroic.



When the sound era came in, Hollywood began to smell the money that could be made in race pictures. There were, after all, around five hundred “colored only” movie houses in the USA. Many of the smaller African-American independents were choked out by the products of the major studios. Hollywood's black-cast films were naturally less daring, but more polished. Usually, they were just straight translations of tried & true comedy, musical, and mystery formulas.

In the 1950's, integration began moving through Hollywood. African-American audiences and performers alike were clamoring for respectable roles in mainstream films. The old race films, where an all black cast played out adventures in an all black fantasy-world, faded into obscurity.

But independent African-American filmmakers hardly faded away -- they just changed their style. From the angry blaxploitation of the 1970's to the urban dramas

of the 1990's, filmmakers like Melvin Van Peebles, John Singleton, and Spike Lee have continued the tradition of African-American cinema. But that's another story...

The early films; in chronological order...

SYMBOL OF THE UNCONQUERED

(1920 - silent) prod, writ & dir: Oscar Micheaux; w/ Iris Hall, Walker Thompson, Lawrence Chenault.

The plot here bounces around with bewildering complexity -- we've got a light-skinned black girl who moves to the northwest and meets a black prospector (who's afraid to admit his feelings for her 'cause he thinks she's white). Then there's another light-skinned black living in town & passing as white -- he's developed such a burning hatred of his own race that he's the nastiest bigot in town. When he learns there is oil under the prospector's land, he calls on the KKK to burn him out! And it's all wrapped up in a storybook ending where the Klan is slaughtered and the nice black folk end up rich and happy. Woo. Impenetrably intricate at times, it still manages to be engaging and the photography is good. However, surviving prints are missing all the action footage at the climax, so it can't help but disappoint.



WITHIN OUR GATES

(1920 - silent) writ, prod & dir: Oscar Micheaux; w/ Evelyn Preer, Flo Clements.

A young black schoolteacher from the South journeys north to raise money for her school and runs smack into Soap Opera Central, with a bewildering parade of love triangles, gangsters on the lam, scandalous secrets, and more marriage proposals than you can shake a bouquet at. It seems that Micheaux went to great pains to insure that he mixed in every single melodrama cliché invented since Homer. And on top of that, he stirred in social issues so volatile that when the film was released in 1920, community leaders both black and white denounced it as an incitement to violence. The film looks at Negro



education & voting rights, snobbish racism, interracial marriage, blacks preying on blacks, blacks betraying their own birthright, and if that's not enough, it features a rather unpleasant enactment of a mob lynching. But most surprising of all, the film ends with a plea for black patriotism -- the film shows that not all whites are evil and not all blacks are good, and argues that blacks should love their country, not hate it, and should fight to make it a better place for their people.

BODY AND SOUL

(1925 - silent) prod, writ & dir: Oscar Micheaux; w/ Paul Robeson, Mercedes Gilbert, Julia Theresa Russell, Lawrence Chenault.

For his film debut, Paul Robeson gets a dual role as twin brothers. One brother is just a good soul trying to get along and win the hand of his sweetheart. But forget all that, the story is really about the other brother, a cold-hearted con-man masquerading as the town's pastor to cover for his hobbies (mainly drinkin', thievin' & rapin'). And he's after the same young lady for his own reasons. And the poor girl's gullible mother sure isn't much help. She's a sweet ole lady, really, but she has all the brains of two rocks banged together. Anyhow, the cast is great, the photography is good, and the shoestring sets they slapped together even look good. But Micheaux's screenplay unwinds itself with stupefying slowness and then ends up with a syrupy fairy tale ending that's a downright cheat. I have to give it points for being well-made and well-played, but the storytelling earns it a few hundred demerits.

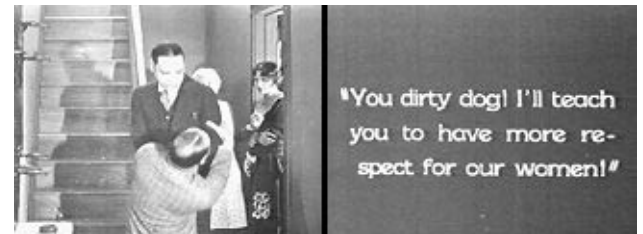


SCAR OF SHAME

(1927 - silent) dir: Frank Perugini; w/ Harry Henderson, Norman Johnstone, Ann Kennedy, Lucia Ann Moses.

A marriage of sympathy between a wealthy black pianist and a poor girl from the slums turns very sour indeed. The plot corkscrews through betrayal, tragedy, and coincidence in the best

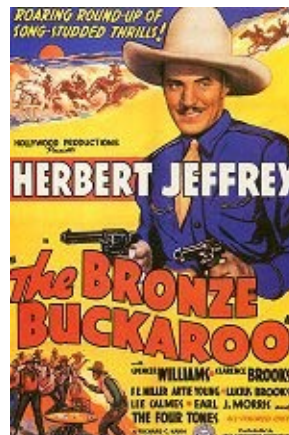
melodrama tradition. It is smoothly made, well played and highly emotional. On the surface, it's a tragedy centered on the caste system within the black community (which can be a bit disturbing to see, for both blacks and whites), but in subtext, it's also a plea for the education and uplifting of lower income blacks.



the SPIRIT OF YOUTH

(1938) dir: Harry Fraser; w/ Joe Louis, Clarence Muse, Mantan Moreland.

A clean-cut country boy goes to the big city to help support his family; he makes a name for himself in the fight game, only to have his ethics & his career endangered by crooked bookies and fast women. It's just the usual boxing fairy tale, but it drags itself along at a pace that may induce nap-time. Boxer Joe Louis makes a convincing country bumpkin, but he can't actually act. Despite some good characters and a few musical breaks, this one is just too dull -- even the boxing scenes are boring.



Herbert Jeffrey (also billed as Herb Jeffries) was the singing cowboy of “race pictures”. A skinny fellow with oddly refined & city-bred good looks, he had an easy style and a classic crooner’s voice. Steadfast, loyal, and an unblemished good guy, he and his horse, Stardusk, were heroes to millions of African-American children.

TWO-GUN MAN FROM HARLEM

(1938) writ & dir: Richard C. Kahn; w/ Herbert Jeffrey, Margaret Whitten, Clarence Brooks, Mantan Moreland.

An honest singing cowboy is framed for murder by a two-timing brass-bound bitch of ranch woman. It's actually a charming little horse opera, with some interesting twists & turns, and Jeffrey gets to play a dual role when he masquerades as a mean-as-a-snake mobster. Adding to the



charm are some scenes that should have been chalked up as rehearsals -- but the budget was so low that if nobody fell flat on their faces, it was a take. Only three musical numbers, but they're good ones -- a ballad (& a half) from Jeffrey, plus a rhythm number and a harmony piece during the Harlem scenes.

HARLEM RIDES THE RANGE

(1939) dir: Richard C. Kahn; w/ Herbert Jeffrey, Lucius Brooks, F. E. Miller.

A wandering cowhand & his comic-relief sidekick stumble into a soggy & mixed-up melodrama vaguely involving a radium mine & some claimjumpers. The plot sort of wanders & stumbles and there are three little ballads from Jeffrey. Mostly boring.

the BRONZE BUCKAROO

(1939) writ & dir: Richard C. Kahn; w/ Herbert Jeffrey, Lucius Brooks, Artie Young.

This time, our singing cowboy rides to the rescue of an old friend who's in the hands of shifty scoundrels trying to steal his land. The thin plot is plumped up with liberal doses of comic relief and a few songs. An average little horse opera.



Spencer Williams, who would become known to white audiences as the Andy of Amos & Andy, was one of the busiest creative talents of race pictures. He could take almost any job on the set, and was constantly involved in writing, producing, directing, and/or acting in films.

BLOOD OF JESUS

(1941) writ & dir: Spencer Williams; w/ Cathryn Caviness, Spencer Williams.

When a devout young woman dies, her soul must travel a road with angelic guidance on the one side and devilish temptation on the other, and she ends up . . . at a night club!?! This is one of the really big hits of race pictures, and it's a simple but powerful moral allegory -- but it's also a bizarre allegory, sometimes to the point of being freakish. However, I can see one



other reason for its popularity. Although the story itself is simple & slow, there's so much music in this thing that it almost qualifies as an opera. Church hymns, jazz, R & B, even a little bluegrass -- the music never stops. Entertaining, if occasionally too weird for words.

GO DOWN, DEATH

(1942) writ & dir: Spencer Williams; w/ Myra D. Hemmings, Samuel H. James, Eddy L. Houston, Spencer Williams.

Um, it goes something like: new preacher moves into town, bad man tries to smear preacher, bad man's foster mother tries to stop him, bad man accidently kills foster mother and his guilt starts to eat away at his soul. Woo -- a wandering and fragmented little morality play that's marred by spotty acting and a plot that doesn't really go anywhere but sorta happens all at once. It even features a snazzy vision of hell thanks to some old silent movie footage (an early version of Dante's Inferno or perhaps it was Melies' Faust -- I've seen it before but can't place it just yet).



And then there's the pictures made by white folks...

Although many of these are not "race pictures" in the strictest sense, they played widely in the segregated theater circuit and some featured the most outstanding African-American talents of their day.

HALLELUJAH

(1929) writ & dir: King Vidor; w/ Daniel L. Haynes, Nina Mae McKinney, William Fountaine.

This is what happens when MGM makes a musical "race picture". A young Black sharecropper gets burned by fast women & crooked gamblers and reforms his ways and turns to preaching -- but the Devil ain't through with him yet, not by a long shot. All of which is a backdrop for some terrific singing & dancing. Being a Hollywood picture, the characters have no depth -- they're just quaint, simpleminded stereotypes. However, the photography is good, the music is great, and the story is surprisingly deep. Whether this makes up for a vaguely



insulting portrait of African-American life will depend on your mood. MGM wouldn't try this again until the much superior *Cabin in the Sky*.

PRINCESS TAM-TAM

(1935 - France) dir: Edmond T. Gréville; w/ Josephine Baker, Albert Prejean, Robert Arnoux.

A hen-pecked French author flees to North Africa, where he turns a beggar girl into a society sensation. Meanwhile, his wife is carrying on with a maharajah -- and they use their respective affairs to make each other jealous. Although this is not a "race picture", but a white French comedy made to showcase the talents of jazz superstar Josephine Baker, it was a favorite on the race movie circuit. It may have been a little too controversial for some white theaters, as the lightweight plot hinges around interracial flirtations. All that aside, it's a delightful flick -- Baker is particularly fetching as the irrepressible, vivacious beggar.



the GREEN PASTURES

(1936) dir: Marc Connelly & William Keighley; w/ Rex Ingram, Oscar Polk, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson.

One of the few black-cast films under the logo of a major studio, this is probably the first to be intended for general audiences. Warner Brothers made this adaptation of the the popular play -- it's a folksy, African-American retelling of the major events of the Old Testament. Mind you, being made by white folks, this thing never manages to escape the stereotypes; every character in here is a sweet simpleton. If you can get past that, however, the flick is delightful. This chitlins & gravy version of the Bible is not merely charming, it's hilarious. There's Noah, trying to convince De Lawd that since he's taking two of every kind of animal, he ought to be taking two jugs of whisky on the ark as well. Then there's the angelic maids cleaning up God's office, all the while gossiping about how scandalous the humans are turning out to be. The film is full of such moments. Those of you who find John Huston's *The Bible* to be ponderous and pretentious should really check this one out.

And God said, "Oh, tha's awright. Ah'll jes ra' back an' pass a miracle."



CABIN IN THE SKY

(1943) dir: Vincente Minnelli; w/ Ethel Waters, Eddi “Rochester” Anderson, Lena Horne, (Mantan Moreland & Louis Armstrong in small but terrific roles as the devil’s helpers).

Thanks to his ever-faithful wife, a good-hearted but weak-willed little man is given six more months to live, while angels & demons vie for his soul. This MGM musical technically has an all black cast -- nonetheless, it’s a darn white movie. I’m certain it was produced with white audiences in mind -- the music is straight off of Broadway and the characters are all cozy, unthreatening types. As long as you don’t expect it to be a specifically African-American film, it is one terrific movie. With Minnelli’s direction and a cast that’s a one-in-a-million concentration of great talent, this may be the best of the pre-Technicolor musicals.



For more information...

Be on the lookout for a repeat of the American Experience production of *Midnight Ramble* on your PBS station.

The book *A Separate Cinema* by John Kisch and Edward Mapp (1992, Noonday Press, 0-374-523606, US\$30.00), is a terrific collection of black-cast film posters, and includes a short historical essay.



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Icon Glossary:



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goopy Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually good flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.