



SILENT CINEMA

Body and Soul

+ intro by Kevin Le Gendre, author, broadcaster and deputy editor of ECHOES magazine.

Body and Soul, made for a segregated Black audience, is a key work of pioneering African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, although it's perhaps more famous for being the film debut of Paul Robeson (and it's quite a debut). Robeson plays Rev Isaiah T Jenkins, a scheming convict impersonating a minister who mesmerises and attempts to swindle his congregation, and Robeson also plays his alter ego, Isaiah's long-lost twin brother Sylvester. The unusual structure explores the use of memory and dreams in dealing with violence and immorality.

Bryony Dixon, BFI Silent Film Curator, bfi.org.uk

Neil Brand on 'Body and Soul'

I have to say, that *Body and Soul* means a great deal to me for a very important reason – one which has affected my whole attitude towards silent cinema since a memorable night a decade or so ago...

In the 35 years that I have been a silent film accompanist, I have been privileged to have a front-row seat for all the major discoveries of early cinema during that time. I have seen films come and go, attitudes shift, and loyalties become challenged, and never more so than at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, the spiritual home and trade show of our industry. There and elsewhere, I have tried never to stop learning, hearing from people vastly more experienced than me about films I thought I would never get to see, and, from time to time, films I should avoid.

It's fair to say that, in my early days, Oscar Micheaux was recognised as a groundbreaking showman and fascinating figure, but the consensus was that his films weren't as exciting. He was a self-taught writer/director and his films travelled at their own pace which, for some modern critics, was too slow. He had helped to create the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, the first film company owned and controlled entirely by African-Americans, and made films specifically for that audience that he understood so well. It didn't help that the films had not been restored, looked a mess, and seemed, at first glance, amateurish. That's how I left it... until fine historians such as Eileen Bowser and Charles Musser reappraised Micheaux's work, and the films were restored... and the Lincoln Center Orchestra played *Body and Soul* at the Barbican with a specially composed score by trombonist Wycliffe Gordon. Finally, that night, I saw what I (and most people who hadn't seen it under these circumstances) had been missing all these years.

The audience.

In the 1925 film (selected by the Library of Congress in 2019 for inclusion in the National Film Registry for being 'culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant') Paul Robeson plays a charismatic criminal on the run who disguises himself as a preacher to swindle a town out of its money. He seduces idealistic young Isabelle Perkins (Julia Theresa Russell) into running away with him to Atlanta, and Isabelle's dilemma, caught between her home

and this man, is played out with the actress alone in the centre of the screen, first looking one way, then the other, for what feels like quite a while.

Wynton Marsalis, in his introduction to the film, started with an instruction. 'Now y'all gonna get loud, you hear me? You're not here to sit in respectful silence!' To drive the point home, the band, when not playing, took on the role of audience onlookers, shouting at the screen, and particularly at the characters, letting loose their feelings about what they were watching. Slowly, slowly... we all began to join in...

Isabelle's dilemma became a call and response – every time she seemed to be straying towards going with Robeson, the crowd howled at her not to make that mistake – when she turned back, the relief in the audience was palpable and vocal. We had time to let fly, courtesy of Micheaux, with the result that the audience that night became another character, the Deep South community that Micheaux made his films for – deeply Christian, used to Gospel and Revivalist meetings, church on Sundays and holding a lively dialogue with their preacher and their God. Two things hit me in that moment of phenomenal, muscular cinema: one was that Micheaux wasn't a poor director, but one who gave his characters all the time in the world for his audience to unload at the screen. The other was that I had missed this out of all my considerations of silent cinema – the audience of the teens and 20s wasn't just there to respectfully digest plot and character, they were there to let off steam.

The moments of jeopardy and catharsis come thick and fast in early cinema. One of the sticks used to beat the silents in my youth was the accusation that they were all overwrought melodramas whose time was, thankfully, past. The sound-era audience judged them entirely by content, having forgotten simpler times when the cinema provided an outlet as well as an entertainment. Like opera, stage melodrama, even, if you will, boxing, certainly football, Early cinema encouraged its audience to release the frustrations and stresses of the week by loving or hating its screen characters. Modern-day pantomime still does – that's a major reason why we go every Christmas.

Now, thankfully, attitudes towards silent cinema and Micheaux have changed vastly. Modern writing about silent film concentrates a good deal on the audiences for which cinema was intended – but my Road to Damascus moment came with *Body and Soul*, Wycliffe Gordon, and a hoarse audience pouring out of the Barbican Concert Hall as high as a kite.

So, the best I can do for this great and wondrously satisfying movie from the BFI Southbank piano is to try to put us all in a cinema in the Deep South where Gospel music and call-and-response are the language spoken – to try to conjure up what Oscar Micheaux wanted for his film and his audience.

And maybe, just maybe, if you've had a tough week... this may be all the therapy you need...

Neil Brand, silentlondon.co.uk (Published with permission from the author)

BODY AND SOUL

Director: Oscar Micheaux
Production Company: Micheaux Pictures Corporation
Screenplay: Oscar Micheaux

Cast

Paul Robeson (*Rt Reverend Isiaah Jenkins/Sylvester*)
Marshall Rodgers (*Negro in business*)
Lawrence Chenault (*Yellow ‘Curley’ Hinds of Atlanta*)
Chester A. Alexander (*Deacon Simpkins*)
Walter Conick (*Brother Amos, church elder*)
Lillian Johnson (*Sis Ca’line*)
Madame Robinson (*Sis Lucy*)
Julia Theresa Russell (*Isabelle*)
Mercedes Gilbert (*Sis Martha*)
Tom Fletcher

USA 1925
102 mins

With live piano accompaniment by Neil Brand

REGULAR PROGRAMME

20-22 Omega Sun 31 Oct 14:30; Thu 4 Nov 18:10
Member Picks: Moonlight Fri 5 Nov 18:10
African Odysseys: Black History Walks Presents: Cause for Concern: Equal Before the Law Fri 5 Nov 18:30-21:30
African Odysseys: A Date with the Devil: Darcus Howe’s Journey from Black Power to Broadcasting Sat 6 Nov 12:00-18:00
African Odysseys: Travels with my Camera: Is This My Country? + White Tribe Tue 9 Nov 18:10
African Odysseys: Trouble in Paradise + Darcus Howe: Son of Mine Sun 14 Nov 15:30
Terror Vision: Tales from the Hood Thu 25 Nov 20:40
Missing Believed Wiped Session 1: The London Palladium Show Sat 27 Nov 13:00
Missing Believed Wiped Session 2: Introducing ‘The Precious Things’: Holiday Startime Sat 27 Nov 15:50
Seniors’ Free Matinee, in partnership with African Odysseys: Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored + intro Mon 29 Nov 14:00
Relaxed Screening: Petite Maman Tue 30 Nov 18:15

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