

OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY

Devoted to African American Film History and Preservation Volume 11, Fall 2003

The End of the Beginning and the Beginning of...? *What Next for Micheaux and Race Film Studies?*

by Arthur Knight
Associate Professor

American Studies & English, The College of William & Mary

"We have come to the end of the beginning," writes Clyde Taylor in his contribution to *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* (Indiana University Press, 2001). Certainly *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* suggests that the beginning's end is a glorious one: Even ten years ago, when the Oscar Micheaux Society was founded and its first "Newsletter" published, it would have been hard for many to imagine such a fine book—one that is at once fabulously produced and designed, intellectually productive, and, with its fresh illustrations and information-rich appendices, very useful—dedicated to Micheaux and silent-era race film. Combined with the flurry of other recent books and essays on Micheaux and his films, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle* stands as a fitting monument to the first phase of scholarship on Micheaux and race film, as an entry way into that first phase, and as a jumping off point for what is yet to come.

Still, even if it is the end of a beginning and even if it is not a rupture but something gentler, an end is an end and thus a time for stocktaking and casting forward. Moreover, my writing here is occasioned by an actual end, a substantive change in the previous state of affairs: At the 2002 meeting of the Oscar Micheaux Society at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Denver, Colorado, Jane Gaines and Charlene Regester, co-founders and co-editors of the "Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter," proposed publishing the "Newsletter" on-line in the future. Indeed, you may be reading this on your computer screen or in a hard copy you printed out yourself.

The "may" is important. The Society members present at the 2002 meeting agreed unanimously that publishing on-line was a good idea—in principle. We thought this move would at once make the "Newsletter" a more fleet and flexible clearing house for information, a more robust domain for exchange among people interested in Micheaux and (as the masthead says) "African American Film History and Preservation," and a less labor intensive and expensive task for our dedicated co-editors, their staff, and their supporting institutions. (Before going any farther, please pause a moment to acknowledge these people, especially Charlene and Jane, for their hard work and enduring dedication.) But the group was also concerned that the "Newsletter" remain broadly accessible, so the co-editors agreed to make sure that Micheaux Society members not connected to the internet will still receive occasional hard copy mailings of the "Newsletter."



After accessibility, another set of concerns emerged in discussion of moving the "Newsletter" online. All agreed that the internet would serve effectively to diffuse—in the positive sense—news of Micheaux and the work of the Society and its members more broadly than conventional print could. But could the information fluidity and welter of the net overwhelm our project? One set of concerns here is quite practical: What shape will the electronic "Newsletter" take? Will it be e-mailed (and snail mailed when necessary) to members or will it, rather, be posted on a website for visiting and downloading? How decentralized or interactive might it be? Will it contain a bulletin board? Will—or how will—members be able to add to the newsletter or site? Etc., etc. Perhaps most practical of all: How will the electronic "Newsletter" be archived? How can the Society best insure the durability of the information the "Newsletter" collects, making sure it doesn't disappear into the digital ether or end up languishing one day in an "orphaned" website?

Very likely most of these questions have already been answered by Jane and Charlene, and others will be answered quickly in practice. To be sure, one of the great things about electronic publishing is that the answers to such questions can fairly easily change as the situation requires, and old and new practices can nest within one another. For example, the current Oscar Micheaux Society website contains, among other features, downloadable PDF files of the first nine issues of the "Newsletter," so if you're missing an issue you can print it for yourself. And when I started this article, several of the issues wouldn't load, but a couple of e-mails later they do. At the same time, as an indicator of the sort of diffusion—in the sense of confusion or dilution—that the web can spawn, a Google search does still turn up two Oscar Micheaux Society websites. One is nearly fully functional and the other almost completely non-functional, but both are quite handsome and equally authoritative looking on initial contact. Since the non-functional site is content free, it probably can be simply zapped (maybe it will already be gone by the

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Oscar Micheaux and Early African American Cinema at Rhode Island College

This past fall, Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island sponsored Oscar Micheaux and Early African American Film: A Symposium. Organized by Dan Moos and K. Kalinak of the English Department at Rhode Island College, the symposium sponsored three Micheaux film screenings in conjunction with lectures by notable scholars of Oscar Micheaux and early cinema.

In mid-October, Jane Gaines of the Duke University's Program in Film \Video\Digital presented a lecture entitled *Black Cinema of the 1920s: How Experimental Was It?* in conjunction with a screening of Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* and Kenneth MacPherson's *Borderline*. In an engaging and personable lecture, Gaines questioned the various categories within which scholars of Micheaux films work. By working through shots and editing sequences in *Within Our Gates*, Gaines asked if Micheaux's cinema might be considered "accidental avant-garde," pointing toward cinematic interpretations that devalue the filmmaker's intention and focus more pointedly on the creative outcome.

Following Gaines's talk a week later, Charlene Regester of the Department of African and Afro-American Studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill discussed Micheaux's relationship to state film censorship boards in her lecture, "Oscar Micheaux as the Crouching Tiger Confronts the Hidden Dragon of Film Censorship." Using outstanding archival research from states such as New York and Virginia, Regester presented Micheaux as a wily artist who found ways to turn the desires and demands of film censors into beneficial marketing tools for himself. Regester suggests Micheaux was a more self-conscious filmmaker who was manifestly concerned with the welfare and draw of his enterprises. Rhode Island College held a screening of *Body and Soul* immediately before Regester's talk.

The last speaker of the symposium was Charles Musser of the Film Studies Program at Yale University. His lecture, "Constructing Racial Identities in the Cinema: From D.W. Griffith to Oscar Micheaux's *Symbol of the Unconquered*" traced the relationships that audience members develop for characters within cinema, particularly identifications that cross racial lines. Musser used Griffith's one reeler, *His Trust Fulfilled*, in conjunction with Micheaux's *Symbol of the Unconquered*, to unpack the mechanics of this identification and present variable scenarios for cinematic commiseration.

A highly successful and well-attended film and lecture series that evidences the increasing interest in Oscar Micheaux and early African American Film more generally, we hope that Rhode Island College would like to hold a subsequent symposium next fall. Stay tuned.

MINUTES OF THE OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY MEETING

Submitted by Clay Steinman, March 7, 2003, Minneapolis, MN

The meeting was convened by Jane Gaines at 12:15 p.m. Brian Taves, Jim Loveland, Karen Bowdre, Gerald Butters, Clay Steinman, Rob Silberman, Adam Knee, Louise Spence, Mia Mask, Charlene Regester, Michele Wallace, Donte McFadden, and Anna Siamopolos were in attendance.

I. The Newsletter/The Future

Jane Gaines led a discussion of the newsletter. The goal is to have it out annually for the SCMS conference (when it is held later), but a periodically updated one will appear at www.duke.edu/web/film. Friends of the Society who wish to renew their paper subscription should use the form on page 14 of the newsletter. Anticipated special issues for the future include Ebony Films, Noble Johnson, black movie theaters and segregation in theaters, and another on performance. Future newsletters will include dissertation summaries in progress as well as vetted nuggets of biographical information that appear on eBay and other sites. Jane asked members to bring news briefs to Society meetings.

There was some discussion of disbanding at the 2002 SCS conference meeting, since more and more people are doing work on Micheaux and other African American silent filmmakers. This year, everyone seemed to want the Society to continue. Jane and Charlene Register suggested that perhaps others might want to take over responsibility for administering the Society. Charlene said the Society should be an umbrella organization, fostering more research and publication on early black/race cinema. Others said the Society was a valuable place where people can discuss their research in progress, books, courses, and potential European venues.

II. Outreach

Public recognition of Micheaux and other early black filmmakers is increasing. The Smithsonian will be circulating a program called "Close Up in Black: African American Film Posters." A package of films will be shown in a former black theater in the South.

III. Future Research Projects

Michelle Wallace said there needs to be a systematic effort to identify the actors in the films of Micheaux as well as in black cinema generally. She stressed that there are performers, who may seem obscure to some now, but were never obscure in their time. Some are still alive and there are people who are alive who can remember people. This could be worthwhile research for people in performance studies, and there is much material on the actors in black cinema at the Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in New York City. There are unsearched archives throughout the country, formal and informal. There is an interview with Fredi Washington on tape at the Institute of the Moving Image in New York City about which no one has yet written. And the University of Missouri, Kansas City has a large college of soundies that have yet to be comprehensively studied.

IV. Field Trip at 2004 SCMS Meeting

The next conference will be in Atlanta, and members are hoping there will be a field trip to a restored historically black theater in Macon, GA.

The meeting adjourned at 1:15 p.m.

BOOK AWARDS & NEW TITLES

Book Awards

Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, authors of *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, Silent Films and His Audiences* (Rutgers University Press, 2000). This book won the Theater Library Association top prize and now it has won the Krazna Frausz Foundation's first prize as the outstanding book in Moving Image History and Culture.

Jane Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed Race Movies in the Silent Film Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2001) won the Katherine Singer Kovacs prize for best book in Cinema Studies.

New Books

BLUE, CAROLL PARROTT. *The Dawn at My Back: A Memoir of a Black Texas Upbringing*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003.

BROWN, JAYNA AND OSCAR MICHEAUX. *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer: The Givens Collection Classics*. Washington Square Press. Anticipated paperback publication date, May 2003.

BUTTERS, GERALD. *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2002.

GREEN, RON. *Visions of Uplift: A Guide to the Films of Oscar Micheaux*. A film-by-film treatment of all the existing films, plus an introduction and conclusion about Micheaux's unique contribution to the philosophy and mechanics of independent cinema, plus a chapter on Micheaux and the Hollywood black-cast musicals. Four appendices cover the semiotics of black spirituals and gospel music, a short statement about Micheaux on the internet, advice on finding films, a simple filmography, and a bibliography. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, anticipated 2004.

KNIGHT, ARTHUR. *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance in American Musical Film*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

MASSOD, PAULA. *Black City Cinema*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001.

TEPA LUPACK, BARBARA. *Literary Adaptations in Black American Cinema: From Micheaux to Morrison*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002.

UKADIKE, FRANK. *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

YEARWOOD, GLADSTONE LLOYD. *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African American Aesthetic Tradition*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000.



MICHEAUX EVENTS CALENDAR

UPCOMING CONFERENCES\SYMPOSIUMS

Race and Representation on the Silver Screen Panel, June 16–18, 2003, Miami, FL.

Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami, FL, Symposium on Black Film. Panelists: Mark Reid (Chair) professor of English and Film at the University of Florida; Pearl Bowser, director and founder of African Diaspora Images; Jane Gaines, director and founder of the Program in Film and Video at Duke University; Clyde Taylor, professor in the Gallatin School of Individualized Study and in the Africana Studies Program at New York University. The Miami event is offered in conjunction with the African American Film Festival and tour of Edward Mapp's black cinema posters, "Close Up in Black" sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). The panel will discuss the history and state of African American film. This is slated to be a great public discussion for the Miami community. The symposium will be held in at the Wolfsonian - Florida International University.

Visit www.wolfsonian.fiu.edu for a complete conference listing.

Micheaux Independent Film Festival, June 14–15, 2003, Great Bend, KS. Details are located on page 5 or you may visit www.micheaux.homestead.com, or visit <http://www.micheauxcommittee.org>

8th Annual Micheaux Festival, August 6–10, 2003, Gregory, SD. Details are available at www.micheaux.org under "calendar," or you may phone 605.835.8002, or write napers@gwtc.net.

HISTORICAL NOTE:

Gregory and Great Bend are two towns on the Great Plains with Micheaux connections—Micheaux ancestors homesteaded in the Great Bend, KS area, and his parents moved to Great Bend when Oscar was 17. Micheaux is buried in Great Bend. Inspired by his Kansas homesteader ancestors, Oscar Micheaux homesteaded on the Rosebud Indian reservation area at Gregory, SD. Micheaux wrote about this reservation extensively and made many films about his homesteading experience. U.S. Highway 281 connects Great Bend, KS and Gregory, SD.

Sembene Celebrates 80th Birthday

The 80th Birthday celebration for African filmmaker Ousmane Sembene is scheduled for **July–August 2003**. Celebration sponsors are the African Diaspora Concerns Foundation (Rosetta Gariney) - USA and African Assembly for Human Rights and (Dr. Alioune Tine) Senegal. The celebration is sponsored by the African Diaspora Concerns Foundation, Inc. For details, please contact African Diaspora Concerns Foundation, Inc. via email adcfi@aol.com or sembene@aol.com or phone 410.435.7317.

University Film and Video Association Conference, July 22–26, Columbia, SC. Details are available at www.ufva.org/registration.

Micheaux Independent Film Festival

June 14 & 15, 2003

Great Bend, Kansas

Crest Theater

Saturday • June 14

- 9:00 am Pearl Browser of African Diaspora Images introduces her documentary, *Midnight Ramble: Oscar Micheaux and the Story of Race Movies*.
- 10:00 am Question and Answer with Pearl Bowser.
- 10:45 am *Body and Soul* (1925), Oscar Micheaux silent film and Paul Robeson's film debut.
- Noon Lunch. Queen Bey performs at Jack Kilby Square, Moses Bandshell, across the street from Crest Theater.
- 1:00 pm Panel discussion of *Body and Soul* with Pearl Bowser, Professor J. Ronald Green, Professor Marie Travis, and Professor Corey Creekmur.
- 2:00 pm *CSA (Confederate States of America)* introduced by KU Professor and movie director Kevin Willmont.
- 3:30 pm Panel discussion of *CSA* with Professor Kevin Willmont, actress Queen Bey, Pearl Bowser, and Professor J. Ronald Green.
- 4:15 pm *Against All Odds: Black Writers in Kansas*, by Professor John Edgar Tidwell of KU. Writers include Gordon Parks, Langston Hughes, and Frank Marshall Davis.
- 5:00 pm Dinner
- 7:00 pm Screenwriter John Clifford introduces his film *Carnival of Souls*
- 8:30 pm Panel discussion of film with John Clifford, Professor Kevin Willmont, Professor Marie Travis, and Bill Shafer.

Sunday • June 15

- 10:00 am Gospel Music at Crest Theater.
- 12:30 pm Ceremony at Great Bend Cemetery—the graves of Oscar Micheaux and Swan Micheaux. Tombstone dedication for Swan Micheaux, secretary-treasurer of Micheaux Book and Film Corporation and producer of independent film *Midnight Ace*.

Continued from page 1.

time you read this). The non-functional Society site doesn't seem to have likely enduring value, but then the same thing might have been said about all sorts of materials that have turned out to be crucial to the work we do. And other instances will arise in relation to the content of the Society website, its electronic newsletter, and virtual links it makes with other entities, where such determinations of value are still less clear cut. For instance, is the (currently) inactive Yahoo-based bulletin board on Micheaux worth archiving? Perhaps, as the Society stands at the threshold of a (more) electronic future, all of this is to say no more than (a) even with the diffusion of the internet, we must remember that the diffusion of information is not total and frictionless but still materially determined and (b) in this diffuse zone all of us must become more vigilant archivists, making sure the on-line world is combed and culled, that it works as we need and want it to, and that data we judge crucial is backed up and deposited for (potential) use in the unforeseeable distance.



I've belabored the idea of the doubleness of diffusion inhering in the "Newsletter"'s move to the net because I want now to suggest that the members of the Micheaux Society, as we shape our ongoing research and scholarship, need at once to diffuse our attention while at the same time keeping an eye on what connects our work and focuses our attention. In this latter regard, Oscar Micheaux has been both illuminating and tremendously functional, but I suggest below both that we need to hang onto him for all we're worth *and* that we need to move beyond Micheaux.

Really, we've had three "waves" of scholarship on or related to Micheaux and race film so far: The first crested in the mid-70s with Cripps, Bogle, and Leab and also relied heavily on Pearl Bowser's crucial cinema programming efforts and Phyllis Klotman's filmographic researches. The second crested in the early 90s (1993 was a big publishing year). And the third—Taylor's end of the beginning—seems to have crested in 2001. Certainly one heartening sign that emerges from this thumbnail history is the acceleration of the pace of work—or, more pointedly, publishing—on Micheaux and race film. Because of this work, we now know much more about Micheaux's life than we did just a few years ago. We have a much more textured understanding and appreciation of Micheaux's filmmaking, especially in the silent era. We have much better coverage of the efforts of race film makers in the silent era and a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances under which African American audiences encountered these films. We are starting to develop and extend (and challenge) theoretical and aesthetic models for understanding race film and racial and cultural identity in relation to it. Most importantly of all, we now actually have two more Oscar Micheaux films than we did before.

Where, then, is there left to go? Lots of places, of course. There are still many Micheaux and race films that we've lost and the search for those must continue, as must the maintaining of the archive we currently have. That deep digging and on-going maintenance, though, is just the tip, albeit a large one, of the iceberg.

Perhaps the most obvious place Micheaux and race film studies must now go is into the sound era. There seems to be a general sense in Micheaux and race film studies that the coming of sound was something like the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Though there has been work that has crossed what we might term the sound barrier—most notably Ronald Green's monograph on Micheaux detailed work on Micheaux's sound-era work is still much scarcer and more schematic than work on the silent-era materials. More work must be done in evaluating and understanding these films.

Expanding from this, we need to ask several periodizing and terminological questions: "Race film"—a phrase I've used unproblematically to this point—seems to be by now an accepted, functional term in our history and criticism, but ought it to be? This is territory we've semi-visited before—though usually under the broader rubrics of black or African American film—and we need to keep visiting it, but with the tighter historicizing focus we've so far brought to bear primarily on the silent era. When does race filmmaking stop? Is it with

the coming of sound and the (increased) use of white finance, distribution, and direction? Is it when filmmakers and black press writers stop using the phrase? (And when is that?) Is it about 1949, when it seems the last spurt of B-movies aimed explicitly at black audiences, with no apparent thought of a potential crossover audience (unlike in the later instance of blaxploitation), occurs? What terms might best help us understand the films Micheaux makes in the 30s and 40s, the various sub-B/off-Hollywood black-cast films of the 1930s and 40s, the work of Spencer Williams, or the 40s musicals starring Louis Jordan? Shifting terms, when our Society talks of African American film history, what are we taking the "historical" to be (let alone the "African American")? When do we imagine "early" African American cinema to end and how do we see it connecting to what comes later? Tackling such questions will at least give us a richer understanding of some currently under appreciated films and add greater detail to our



Billboard for Micheaux film.

history of race/African American film, but continuing the sorts of discursive analyses that have been done most thoroughly for the 1920s will also give us—and socio-cultural historians more generally—a fuller understanding of how conceptions of race and community were shifting with the expansion of mass culture.

A particularly urgent research agenda—one that is perhaps obvious with the move to considering sound film, though the concern applies to the silent era as well and isn't tied wholly to the film text—is understanding how race film has interrelated with what is sometimes

Continued on next page.

called “the music.” It’s a commonplace that African American music has been the most powerful and wide reaching African American art, one that has a shaping influence on literature and visual art, but black music’s influence on or, at the very least place in, 30s and 40s race film (now using the phrase provisionally) has yet to be much examined. We need both detailed formal descriptive analyses of how music, image, and narrative interrelate in a range of films aimed at black audiences as well as a broader examination of how music worked in cinemas in black neighborhoods, whether as accompaniment to silent films or additional (or perhaps primary) attraction in the sound era. This area of inquiry seems additionally crucial both because black music provided the most direct link between black addressed films and Hollywood films (e.g., Cab Calloway working in both) and because black music set standards of aesthetic excellence and popular relevance that were clearly on race filmmakers’ minds as they set about their work.

Coincident with the above, perhaps, is the continued need to expand our understandings of black cinema-going conditions and habits and leisure time practices as they shifted across time and varied across regions. Since people born the year Micheaux released his first sound film are now in their mid-seventies, it’s especially urgent that we start augmenting our archival research into cinema-going—invaluable as it is—with oral histories that solicit elders’ (and not necessarily only those 70 or older) recollections of how the movies, as well as other leisure activities, fit into their lives and what the experience of going to the movies in various, often adamantly racialized and racist, times and places was like.

With this call for oral history collection I suppose I’ve come back round to my initial assertion above that we, collectively, need to keep digging, to keep looking for “lost” material. In this endeavor, the “Newsletter’s” move to the internet and the Society’s presence on the web could very well serve as a mechanism of collection and dissemination: Many of us can do—and some have done—such work and used it toward our own specific research ends, but such materials (e.g., transcripts or even sound files of interviews but also documents, etc.) can easily be placed in their raw forms in the “Newsletter” or on the website so that they can be more broadly used. In fact, wouldn’t it make sense for us also to begin to track the history of our own collective endeavor via interviews with people like Tom Cripps, Pearl Bowser, or Phyllis Klotman?

Finally, even as the Micheaux Society makes its shift more fully to the electronic world, the world of motion pictures is making another

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medium shift of its own, from videotape as the primary means of broad dissemination of films and as a crucial teaching and research tool to DVD. The Library of Congress *Within Our Gates* and *Scar of Shame* are already available on a single disc, carrying those films into this new medium, and Spencer Williams’ *The Blood of Jesus* and *Go Down Death* are available (in nice prints on a disc containing the documentary *Movies of Color: Black Southern Cinema* [produced and directed by Tom Thurman; Wellspring Media, 2002]), but otherwise Micheaux and race film remain wholly on tape and film. We need to work to make sure that Micheaux and race film materials make the transition to digital formats. Ideally we will also work to ensure that in the transition process still more material becomes more broadly available, in cleaner prints, and perhaps even with scholarly commentary tracks, alternative music tracks, and other kinds of additional materials.

The beginning of Micheaux and race film studies may, indeed, have ended but not before it generated—called into being—really new interest in this figure and field. Our challenge now as we start a new beginning is to continue to enliven and enlarge that interest and ensure that it continues to endure.



See page 13 for an article about the CD-ROM
African Americans in Cinema: The First Half Century.



Billboard for Micheaux film, *The Gunsaulus Mystery*.

IN THE NEWS

The John Hope Franklin Collection

by Karen Jean Hunt

The John Hope Franklin Collection of African and African American Documentation in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library (RBMSCL) at Duke University identifies and acquires materials pertinent to African American studies for both RBMSCL and the general collections in Perkins Library. The collection is especially strong regarding nineteenth-century slavery and African American life in the post-civil rights era, highlighting the areas of Dr. Franklin's own research and scholarship from 1943–1999.

The American slavery holdings include more than 20 autobiographical works by former slaves from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Materials on the Reconstruction Period focus on Black mobility, African-American political activity, the transition to wage and contract labor, white violence and black response. The collection also contains a good mix of first-and third-person accounts of black life during the age of Jim Crow. Personal memoirs and correspondence, organizational records, and pertinent government material are all represented in the collection. Central to the Franklin Collection is the Behind the Veil Oral History Project, undertaken by the Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies between 1993 and 1997. The collection includes 1,260 interviews with people from Albany, GA; Fargo, AK; Birmingham and Tuskegee, AL; Charlotte, Durham, Enfield, New Bern, Wilmington, and Craven County, NC; LeFlore County, MS; Memphis, TN; Muhlenburg County, KY; New Iberia and New Orleans, LA; Norfolk, VA; Columbia, Orangeburg, St. Helena, and Summerton, SC; and Tallahassee, FL.

The John Hope Franklin Collection of African and African American Documentation is continually working to expand the scope and depth of its African and African American holdings. Back issues of the *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter* were recently donated to the collection. We are especially interested in documentary materials concerning African American intellectuals, African American life in the Jim Crow South (the 1890s through the 1930s) and the African American experience outside of the United States, especially that experience as it relates to travel in Africa. Individuals wishing to donate such materials or those wishing additional information on all holdings in the John Hope Franklin Collection of African and African American Documentation should contact:

franklin-collection@duke.edu

or visit <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/franklin/>

First Black Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux Honored at Hollywood Entertainment Museum

The pioneering work of African American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux was celebrated in the first exhibit of its kind on the West Coast, *American's First African American Filmmaker*. It opened Thursday, February 13, 2003 at the Hollywood Entertainment Museum.

A visionary whose work was seen in both silent and talking pictures from 1919 to 1948, Micheaux was unafraid to tackle such taboo subjects as judicial and racial prejudice, lynching, poverty, African Americans passing for white and interracial marriage. Credited with more than 40 films, he brought Paul Robeson to the screen, wrote several novels, and made African Americans a visible presence on movie screens.

The exhibit, which ran through Sunday, April 6, explored Micheaux's controversial themes and aesthetics through video clips and still images, original poster art, production documents and personal letters.

"Long before Spike Lee began making films, Oscar Micheaux was creating all black cast films for audiences of color," said Jan-Christopher Horak, curator of Hollywood Entertainment Museum. "Rather than presenting Hollywood stereotypes, which depicted African Americans in servile positions, as violent criminals or happy-go-lucky fools, his films were reflections of political and social discourses with the black community."

His films were shown almost exclusively in northern urban and southern segregated cinemas in a time when the film industry barred African Americans from working in creative roles behind the camera. They were financed on a shoestring, with Micheaux as the screenwriter, casting director, producer, director and distributor and he is recognized for paving the way for future black filmmakers.

Within Our Gates (1919), one of his most controversial movies, was a direct response to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that showed viciously racist views of African Americans in the South during and after the Civil War. Micheaux, who introduced famed singer Paul Robeson in 1924's *Body and Soul*, released his final film, *The Betrayal*, in 1948.

Micheaux finally received his due credit in 1986, when the Director's Guild of America honored him with a Golden Jubilee Special Directorial Award. In 1987, he was bestowed a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame next to actress/singer Dorothy Dandridge and singer Harry Belafonte, two major African American stars.

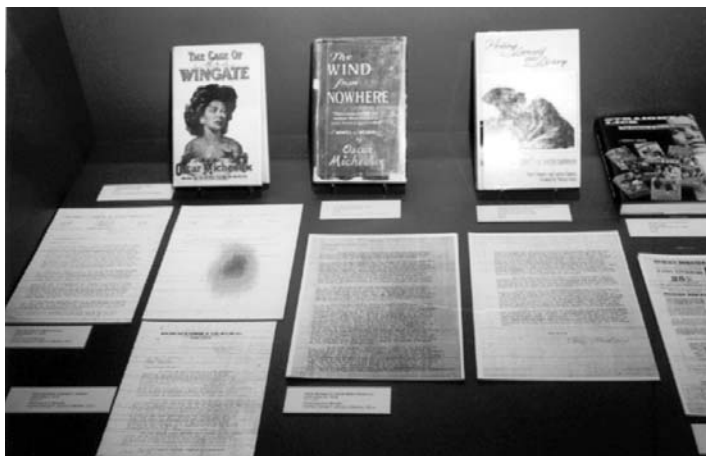
IN THE NEWS

First Black Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux Hollywood Entertainment Museum



During the heyday of lynching, between 1889 and 1918, 3,224 individuals were lynched, of whom 2,522 or 78 percent were black. Typically, the victims were hung or burned to death by mobs of white vigilantes, frequently in front of thousands of spectators, many of whom would take pieces of the dead person's body as souvenirs to help remember the spectacular event.

-- Richard M. Perloff



IN THE NEWS

Spotlight on SITES

The Smithsonian Institution Travel Exhibition Service (SITES) is one of the four National Programs of the Smithsonian Institution. SITES makes available a wide range of exhibitions about art, science and history, which are shown not only in museums but wherever people live, work, and play including in libraries, science centers, historical societies, community centers, botanical gardens, schools and shopping malls. Exhibition descriptions and tour schedules are available at <http://www.si.edu/sites>.

Close Up in Black: African American Film Posters on view at the Wolfsonian. Florida International University, Miami, FL, April 16–July 17, 2003. This exhibit examines African American cinema through the movie poster. The exhibition pays tribute to the performers, writers, designers, directors, and producers whose work, much of which has not survived the passage of time, has been seen by only a few. These posters reflect the mood and looks of the eras in which they were produced. The permanent Edward Mapp collection is housed in the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library.

SITES organized this exhibition in collaboration with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture. This exhibition is scheduled to tour until April, 2005.

Persons interested in serving as a tour site may contact Parker Hayes (202) 357-3168, ext 134.



Acknowledgement

- A special *Thank you* to Fiona Barnett for designing the website. The site has received acclaim and was recognized for "cutting edge technology" by Marty Keenan, Organizer and Founder of the Micheaux Independent Film Festival at Great Ben Kansas. "Great website, by the way!" said Katherine Spring, Programmer, University of Madison–Wisconsin Cinemateque.

Research Projects

Professors Rob Silberman and John Wright of the University of Minnesota are starting a research project on African

American film exhibition in the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota. Please contact Robert Silberman at silbe001@umn.edu if you have suggestions or advice about sources of information concerning distribution and exhibition.

Professors Dana F. White and Matthew Bernstein are working on a study of film exhibition in Atlanta, GA. See the recent: Dana F. White, "A Landmark in Negro Progress:" The Auditorium Theatre, 1914–1925, *Marquee: The Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2002): 15–21. Their research is soon to be published as *Segregated Cinema in a Southern City: Atlanta, 1895–1996*. In 2000, they collaborated on the exhibition "Selling Race: Cinematic Poster Art from Race Films to Blaxpolitation" at the Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University.

A New Jazz Score for the Timeless Clash of *Body and Soul*

by Lawrence Cosentino

There is a frightening amount of music bottled up inside the foursquare frame of Wycliffe Gordon. Through all the soulful and explosive performances the MSU trombone master has given us in recent years, not once has he been caught lounging suavely on stage while waiting to take a solo. Instead, Wycliffe's way of "dealing with it" (his favorite phrase) is to stand stiffly and seethe like a big-shouldered volcano, until such time as he is able to vent his blast-furnace imagination into the nearest large tube—trombone, tuba, didgeridoo, or anything else that pushes out an expressive column of air.

NYU Africana Studies Holds Book Signing

The Institute of African-American Affairs (IAAA) and the Africana Studies Program (Africana) at New York University sponsored "Oscar Micheaux & His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era" in November 2002. This event raised awareness about Micheaux's work and included a book signing by authors of essays appearing in the collection: A. J. Jaffa, Sister Francesca Thompson, Michele Wallace, Louise Spence, Clyde Taylor, and Phyllis Klotman as well as co-editors Pearl Bowser, Jane Gaines, and Charles Musser.

PAST EVENTS

Library Shows
Rare Movies

From an article by Sara Wildberger, *Washington Post*, Feb. 1, 2001

Oxon Hill Library in Prince George County, Maryland, hosted a public showing of several rare all-black films including Oscar Micheaux's 1925 productions *Within Our Gates* and his most controversial film *Body and Soul*.

Prince George's County film librarian Kent Moore remembered segregated theaters but did not recall seeing any so-called "race movies" during his childhood because his hometown was too small to attract them. In towns that didn't have a black theater, all-black films were sometimes shown at late-night screenings called "Midnight Rambles," which is also the title of Pamela A. Thomas's 1994 documentary about early black films.

Moore discovered them as an adult when he became the Prince George County's film librarian. There were a few of the rare films in the county's collection when Moore arrived, and he soon acquired more.

Now the Oxon Hill Library has about 70 films in its collection that range from all-black newsreels made just after World War II to to the latest acquisition, a DVD of a musical performance by Bessie Smith. The films include melodramas, musicals, romances, and westerns produced during the 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Oxon Hill's collection is unique and extensive. Moore gets calls from film-seekers all over the world, and the system often handles referrals from the Library of Congress and the American Film Institute.

The range of this collection, the difficulties early African American filmmakers meet and overcame, and the unique perspective that these films represent, and the fact that many films produced for black audiences have been lost or forgotten were compelling reasons for Moore to organize the film series in February, 2001.

Some of the films are available on video or DVD, but they are often hard to find.

"Public libraries aren't always interested in them," Moore said. "They should be—especially if they have an African American community."

Nitric Acid Diminishes
Black Silent Films

From an article by Ben Dobbin, *Durham Herald-Sun*, Feb. 18, 2001

Nitric acid, a volatile ingredient in movies made before 1951, corrodes rapidly when exposed to warmth or moistness for years on end. That is one reason for the loss of some films from a flourishing period in black cinematography. Seven of the survivors were screened at the George Eastman House's Dryden Theater in February, 2001.

In the 1920s, especially in Chicago, black filmmakers churned out shoestring-budget silent films with mostly black casts. While Hollywood tended to turn out caricatures, silent-film classics such as *Body and Soul* by premier black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux strove to tell the true story of black life in a segregated nation.

Today, no more than 100 black-produced films from that era remain and many of them are badly decomposed or reduced to fragments. Those lucky enough to fall into the hands of film preservationists before being scarred by "nitric melt" are kept in near-freezing vaults to slow down their deterioration.

During the Eastman House retrospective, titled "Black Silent Cinema: A Revival," the Herb Smith All-Stars and jazz trombonist Wycliffe Gordon took turns jamming in the orchestra pit.

"Many of these films have a sort of polemical edge—they're trying to give the viewer a more realistic, a more accurate description of what African American culture is," said Paolo Cherchi Usai, senior curator of motion pictures at Eastman House.

"Even in the digital age, films are destined to gradually degrade," Cherchi Usai said.

"Modern viewers think that once they see a film on DVD or TV, the film is preserved. Well, that is not true," he said. Film—a physical artifact—can shrink, fade, or crumble to dust in a lifetime.

More than 80 percent of all silent films are lost, and the rate is probably higher for home movie-quality films produced by black filmmakers who had no hope of getting jobs at major Hollywood studios.



Micheaux film cast for *The Gunsaulus Mystery*.

LEROY COLLINS “THE BETRAYAL” INTERVIEW

Reported by Martin Keenan

One Saturday in November 2002, a man called me from the NYC area (Roy Collins) and said that his dad, Leroy Collins, was the lead actor in Oscar Micheaux's last film *The Betrayal* (1948). I said, “How long has your Dad been gone?” He responded: “What?” I said, “How long has your Dad been deceased?” He said: “He’s alive and well, lives in Chicago, plays golf, and spends his winters in San Diego.” I called him immediately for an interview.

Leroy Collins, 79, of Chicago remembers attending college and seeing advertisement-seeking students interested in a summer job working on a movie. Collins applied, hoping to secure a position as a stagehand. The next thing he knew, Collins was in line reading a script with several others. Micheaux liked him instantly and cast him in the role of “Martin Eden”, his alter ego. In fact, Collins recalls “Micheaux never called me Leroy again—he always called me “Martin” or “Martin Eden” throughout the film.

It took 3 months or so to film the movie with scenes being shot in Chicago, Wisconsin, and other places. Collins remembers the script as “thick as a phone book”. Leroy said he was in 70% of the scenes, and attend the Chicago premiere along with Micheaux. According to Collins, “one take” was usually good enough, but Micheaux would sometimes shoot two takes.

Collins reports that Micheaux had a chauffeur, a big car and that his wife, Alice B. Russell was with him constantly. Collins said, “I think she was an English major: she made corrections for him”.

Collins describes Micheaux as wearing a suit and tie, walking with a cane. Micheaux governed the movie set in an autocratic manner. While nice to him, Collins reports that Micheaux did not accept suggestions—he was a monarch. Once while riding in the car with Micheaux in the country, Micheaux said “Take a shot of that farmhouse. That will look good in the movie.” When the owners of the house stuck their heads out of the window while the cameraman was shooting, Micheaux yelled at them for sticking their heads out of their own home!

The guy who played the Dad in the film “Dr. Lee” was a man named Harris Gaines, a radio personality in Chicago. This is the guy with white hair that is on the lobby cards. Yvonne Machen, who played the role of “Terry”, was a very accomplished Broadway actress.

Highlights of the SACILE/PORDENONE Silent Cinema Festival

October 13-20, 2001

by Marie Travis
George Washington University



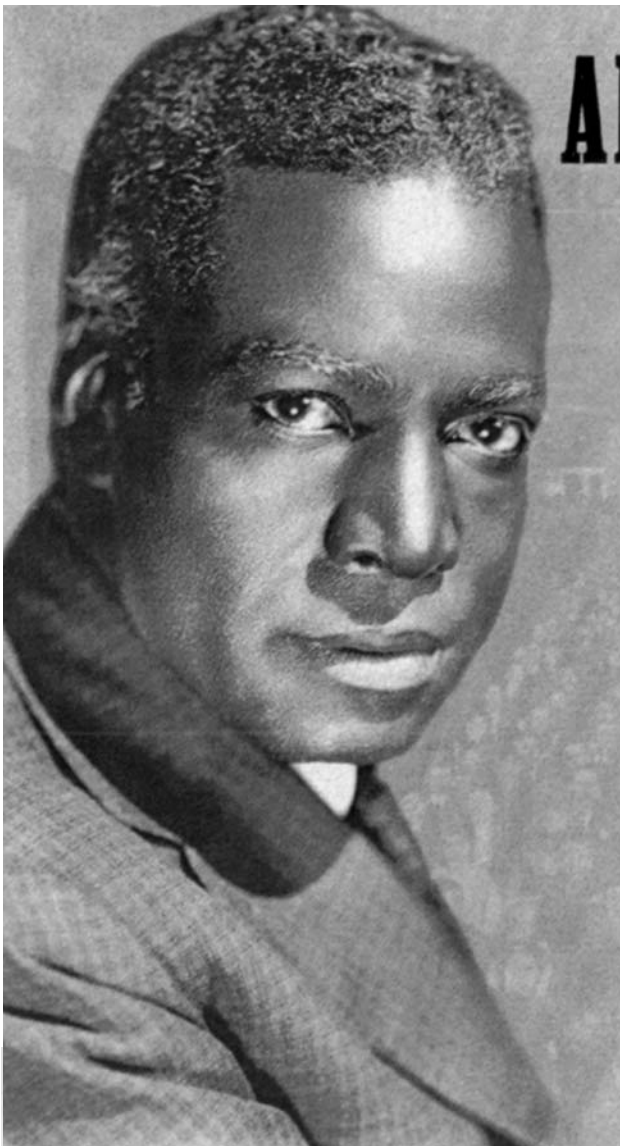
A seafaring drama shot on Bannec Island in the Quessant archipelago in Brittany opened the film festival. This was Jean Epstein's first film production. The film starred non-professional actors. In order to tell the story as it really happened the director returned to the island where the events actually took place and used real people and places to create his film. Musical accompaniment was provided by a quartet from Brittany: Kristen Nogues, Jacques Pellen, Patric Mollard and Jacky Mollard.

Oscar Micheaux and His Circle called the attention to the work of Afro-American filmmakers. Oscar Micheaux being the most important of those film makers. This was also to highlight the “racial” cinema produced by whites for the Afro-American public in the United States. Three of Micheaux's surviving works were viewed: *Within Our Gates*, *Body and Soul*, and the *Symbol of the Unconquered*. Micheaux's sound film *The Exile* was shown as well. Also included was the 1914 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The Japanese Silent Cinema, coordinated by Hiroshi Komatsu, professor of Waseda University, represented the largest retrospective review of Japanese Silent Cinema ever presented. The period covered was from 1898-1935 and focused on the following themes: fiction and documentary, Shinpa Theater tradition, the Kansai region and cinema production after the 1923 earthquake; the modern drama of Gedaigeki and the 1930's silent films.

The Griffith Project, Part V was the fifth part of a complete retrospective review dedicated to D.W. Griffith. This project was begun in 1997 and includes the projection of all the films shot by Griffith in 1911.

The closing event was the Abel Gance *Napoleon* (1927). This was a newly restored version. Thanks to the enthusiastic life's work of Kevin Brownlow, the film was accompanied by the Labacensis Chamber Orchestra from Lubiana conducted by Carl Davis, author of the score. The film was shown at the Teatro Nuovo Giovanni Theater, which seated 1,200 people. An antique train was provided to transport guests from Sacile to Udine. By all accounts it was remarkable.



AFRICAN AMERICANS IN CINEMA

The National Endowment for the Humanities has awarded the funds to support *African Americans in Cinema: The First Half Century*, a CD-ROM project directed by Emeritus Professor Phyllis Klotman, under the auspices of the Department of Afro-American Studies' Black Film Center/Archive. The project will produce the first CD-ROM dedicated to black film history, comprehensively introducing users to black films by placing them in the context of production and reception. It is designed to advance classroom technology for multicultural teaching and learning, thus filling a gap in the curriculum and on the electronic reference shelves of public, secondary, and university libraries; it will also complement scholarly texts available on black film. Black film studies lends itself readily to historical inquiry regarding such issues as enterprise, representation and race relations. *African American in Cinema: The First Half Century* will visually demonstrate these connections by organizing historical data into four chronological periods which reflect landmarks in the history of the country or history of cinema. The CD-ROM will contain full screen images of photographs, posters, production stills, and film clips, as well as audio excerpts and texts that will help contextualize the first half century of black cinema. Scholars in black film studies, including Thomas Cripps, Henry T. Sampson, Charles Musser, Charlene Regester, Jane Gaines, Michele Wallace, Mark Reid, and others will write short essays on directors, films, and genres. Release is slated for 2003.



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Oscar Micheaux Honored in South Dakota Hall of Fame and Festival

South Dakota honored Oscar Micheaux by inducting him into its Hall of Fame, located in Chamberlain, South Dakota, in 2001. This recognition acknowledged Micheaux's ground-breaking contributions in black filmmaking through his commitment to an honest portrayal of African American life during a time of, at best, a segregated society, and, at worst, a period of active racist practices. Micheaux made his films under these difficult circumstances with little money but never wavered in portraying his perspective through his films and writings.

Oscar Micheaux's family had been homesteaders in Kansas. In 1912 this experience

influenced Micheaux to try homesteading on the Rosebud Reservation in Gregory, South Dakota. His life in South Dakota and homesteading experiences became the focus of much of his later writings and films.

This year, Gregory will be the scene of the 8th Annual Oscar Micheaux Festival on August 6–10.

For more information about the Festival, please call 605-835-8002 or email napers@gwtc.net.



*2001 Oscar Micheaux
exhibit unveiling
in Pierre, SD
Hall of Fame ceremony.*



The *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter* is dedicated to providing a medium through which we can promote discourse, debate, and discovery about filmmaker and novelist Oscar Micheaux and other filmmakers who were active in early African American cinema. Unfortunately, much of their work remains inaccessible. It is through this medium that we hope to provide an avenue for inquiry into Micheaux and the others who contributed to early African American cinema.

The *Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter* is a publication of the Film\Video\Digital Program at Duke University. We welcome your contributions, questions, and comments. All materials must be submitted by September 30, 2003. Information and articles for editorial review should be sent to:

Oscar Micheaux Society Newsletter
Duke University Film\Video\Digital Program
104 Crowell Hall
Box 90671
Durham, NC 27708-0671

Co-Editors:

Jane Gaines
Charlene Register

Guest Editor:

C.T. Woods-Powell

Assistance:

Ginna Davidson
Fiona Barnett
Hank Okazaki
Lisa Poteet

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