

Devoted to African American Film History and Preservation

# OSCAR MICHEAUX SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER

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Volume 7, Summer 1998



## *The Symbol of the Unconquered*

**Restored by Turner Classic Movies**

**July, 1998 Premiere**

**on TCM and at Apollo Theatre in New York**

*The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), Oscar Micheaux's fourth feature film, thought to be lost, was recently discovered at Cinematique Royale in Brussels. The Belgian Film Archive then returned the film to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. For the past year, Jane Gaines and Charlene Regester, co-editors of the *Oscar Micheaux Society*

*Newsletter*, have been consulting with Turner Classic Movies (TCM) on the restoration of this important work and were instrumental in motivating Turner Classic Movies to pursue the project. We are happy to announce that TCM will complete restoration work on the 35mm film and translation of the intertitles (now in Flemish and

French) in time for a July 1st television broadcast premiere.

The screening of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* will kick off A Separate Cinema, five Wednesdays of early black film programming on TCM, and will feature a score performed by jazz impresario Max Roach. Special connecting segments written in consultation with historian Thomas Cripps will be hosted by African American veteran performers Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. These segments will be shot at the Douglass Theatre in Macon, Georgia, a recently restored black movie house.

The New York premiere will be held at the Apollo Theatre. Max Roach will perform a live score for the event. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee have been invited to attend, as has James McDaniel who plays Lt. Fancy on *NYPD Blue*. You may recall that Mr. McDaniel attended the Oscar Micheaux Film Festival in South Dakota last August.

The discovery of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* will significantly change film history, placing Micheaux alongside the legendary director D.W. Griffith, whose ride of the Klansman in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) stirred the young NAACP to take political action. Until this film was recovered, it was not known that an African American had written and directed a film containing a critical examination of the Ku Klux Klan only a few years after the release of Griffith's powerful epic.

*The Symbol of the Unconquered* is a tale of duplicity and deception involving a black man passing for white who hates his own race, an ambitious black hero, a harrowing ride of the KKK, and a black woman mounting a horse to sound the alarm. The Klan tries to run the hero off his land when they learn it has valuable oil deposits. Like the earlier *Within Our Gates* (1919), which contains a controversial sequence in which a black man and his wife are lynched, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* would have challenged the audiences of its day.

Faced with censorship in many U.S. cities, Micheaux began to distribute his films in Europe, which explains why *Within Our Gates* was discovered at the Filmoteca Español in Madrid, and why *The Symbol of the Unconquered* turned up in Bel-

gium. Returned to the Library of Congress in exchange for a print of *Dracula*, *The Symbol of the Unconquered* has been extremely popular, playing to enthusiastic crowds in major U.S. cities as well as in Italy where it was recently screened at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival.

After the television premiere, Turner Classic Movies will make the restored 35mm print of *The Symbol of the Unconquered* available for rental from the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Library, where institutions can also rent the two other extant Micheaux silent films, *Within Our Gates* and *Body and Soul* (1924).

Although only three of Micheaux's twelve silent films survive, he was the only black movie pioneer who weathered the transition to sound and went on to produce as many as thirty-eight more features right up until his death in 1951.

### **Oscar Micheaux and his Circle Touring Package and Book**

*The Symbol of the Unconquered* is one of six feature films that will be part of a new 35mm touring package of silent race movies titled Oscar Micheaux and his Circle, which include films by Micheaux and other African American filmmakers of his time. In addition to the three Micheaux silents, the grouping will include *Ten Nights in a Barroom* (1926) and *Scar of Shame* (1927) from the Colored Players Film Corp. of Philadelphia, *The Flying Ace* (1926) from the Norman Film Mfg. Company based in Florida, and *Eleven PM* (1928) from the Maurice Film Company of Detroit. The program will also include documentary footage shot in Florida by African American anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston as well as short pieces by Eloyce Gist, a Washington, D.C., filmmaker whose work dealt with religious themes.

A collection of essays, based on the conference on early race movies held at Yale University in 1995, is forthcoming from Smithsonian Institution Press in a volume edited by Pearl Bowser of African Diaspora Images, Jane Gaines of Duke University, and Charles Musser of Yale. The book will serve as a printed accompaniment to the touring film package.

# Turner Classic Movies

## A Separate Cinema

### Programming Schedule

#### Wednesday, July 1

##### Featuring Oscar Micheaux

8 pm *Midnight Ramble* (1994)  
 9 pm *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) with Walter Thompson and Lawrence Chenault  
 10 pm *Within Our Gates* (1919) with Evelyn Preer, Lawrence Chenault and Charles D. Lucas  
 11:30 pm *Midnight Ramble* (repeat)  
 12:30 am *Swing* with Cora Green, Hazel Diaz, Carmen Newsome and Dorothy Van Engle  
 2:00 am *The Symbol of the Unconquered*  
 3:00 am *Scar of Shame* (1927) with Lawrence Chenault and Shingzie Howard (NOT the Micheaux film)

#### Wednesday, July 8

##### Featuring Paul Robeson & Herb Jeffrey

8:00 pm *King Solomon's Mines* (1937) with Paul Robeson, Anna Lee and Roland Young  
 9:30 pm *Song of Freedom* (1937) with Paul Robeson and Elizabeth Welch  
 10:45 pm *Jericho* (1937) with Paul Robeson, Henry Wilcoxon and Princess Kouka  
 12:15 am *Two Gun Man from Harlem* (1938) with Herbert Jeffrey, Clarence Brooks and Mantan Moreland  
 1:30 am *The Bronze Buckaroo* (1938) with Herbert Jeffrey, Spencer Williams and Clarence Brooks  
 2:30 am *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939) with Herbert Jeffrey, Spencer Williams and Clarence Brooks

#### Wednesday, July 15

##### Featuring Josephine Baker & Spencer Williams, Jr.

8:00 pm *Princess Tam Tam* (1935) with Josephine Baker,



Albert Prejean and Robert Arnoux  
 9:30 pm *Zou Zou* (1934) with Josephine Baker, Jean Gabin and Pierre Larquey  
 11:30 pm *Go Down Death* (1944) with Spencer Williams and Myra Hemmings  
 12:30 am *Blood of Jesus* (1941) with Spencer Williams and Cathryn Caviness  
 1:30 am *Dirty Gertie from Harlem, U.S.A.* (1941) with Spencer Williams, Francine Everett and Don Wilson  
 2:45 am *Juke Joint* (1947) with July Jones, Spencer Williams, and Leonard Duncan

#### Wednesday, July 22

##### Crime Stories

8:00 pm *Dark Manhattan* (1937) with Ralph Cooper, Cleo Herndon and Clarence Brooks  
 9:15 pm *Mystery in Swing* (1938) with Monty Hawley, Buck Woods and Sybil Lewis  
 10:30 pm *Gang War* (1938) with Ralph Cooper, Gladys Snyder and Jesse Lee Brooks  
 11:45 pm *Miracle in Harlem* (1948) with Sheila Guyse and Stepin Fetchit  
 1:00 am *Midnight Shadow* (1939) with Napoleon Simpson, Ruby Dandridge and Clinton Rosamond  
 2:00 am *Midnight Ramble* (repeat)

#### Wednesday, July 29

##### Sports Films & Musicals

8:00 pm *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) with Jackie Robinson, Minor Watson and Ruby Dee  
 9:30 pm *Spirit of Youth* (1938) with Joe Louis, Clarence Muse, Edna Mae Harris, Cleo Desmond and Jesse Lee Brooks  
 10:45 pm *Keep Punching* (1939) with Willie Bryant, Mae Johnson and Francine Everett  
 12:15 am *Duke is Tops* (1939) with Ralph Cooper, Lena Horne and Neya Peoples  
 1:30 am *Broken Strings* (1940) with Clarence Muse and Matthew Beard  
 2:30 am *Junction 88* (1947) with Bob Howard, Noble Sissie and Dewey Pigmeat Markham  
 3:45 am *Sepia Cinderella* (1947) with William Greaves and Stella Guyse  
 5:00 am *Boy! What a Girl!* (1946) with Tim Moore, Duke Williams, Elwood Smith and Sheila Guyse



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# Rhapsodies in Black

## Art of the Harlem Renaissance

The exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. April 11-June 22, 1998 showcased Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*. The April 13, 1998 Associated Press story follows:

The Harlem Renaissance, the cultural explosion of jazz, dance, film, poetry and painting that swept the United States, western Europe and the Caribbean 75 years ago, is getting its first major retrospective in this country.

Rhapsodies in Black, a bow to George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, opened Saturday at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

It explores the Harlem Renaissance not as a phenomenon confined to a few square miles of Manhattan, but as an historical moment of global significance, says the foreword to the catalog, written by Susan Ferleger Brades, director of the Corcoran, and Roger Malbert, senior curator of London's Hayward Gallery.

The show begins with two films from the 1920s. One, about a lynching (*Within Our Gates*, 1919), was made by black novelist-turned filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. The other, *Sur un air de Charleston*, or *Charleston* (1927) by French director Jean Renoir, is a fantasy about a black

space traveler and a white woman, who dances the Charleston.

Chicago artist Archibald J. Motley, Jr., who died in 1981, has eight paintings in the show. In Paris, he painted one called *Blues*, picked for the cover of the catalog. Its tight image of dancers, musicians, and instruments reflects French enthusiasm for the jazz hot.

One of the most striking sculptures in the show is *Negro Aroused* (1935) by Edna Manley, the late wife and mother of prime ministers of the Caribbean Republic of Jamaica.

Though the Harlem Renaissance is often said to have ended with the stock market crash in 1929, organizers of the exhibit point to the importance of the Negro Theater unit in the Federal Theater Project of 1935. It was part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's program to end the Depression.

The black unit was headed by John Houseman. One production was Orson Welles' landmark version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, set in

Haiti instead of Scotland, and performed with an all-black cast.

Program illustration by Paul R. Meltsner for William Jordan Rapp and Wallace Thurman's Broadway hit, *Harlem*, 1929



# Oscar Micheaux in Roanoke, Virginia

by Aukram Burton

The city of Roanoke, Virginia, joins ranks with other municipalities across the country that lay claim to Oscar Micheaux. In a 1925 Roanoke City Directory of Businesses, Oscar Micheaux is listed as president of the Oscar Micheaux Film Corporation with an office located at 109 1st. Street N.W., also known as Henry Street. The building at this address was also home to the Congo Film Service, where Mr. Tiffany C. Toliver served as president. The business directory, in addition to an article published in the October 29, 1942 *Roanoke Times and World News* ( *Sewell Recalls Filming of Pictures Here in 1921* ), provides documentation that Roanoke was one setting for Micheaux's movies.

In the 1942 article, actress Alma Sewell recalls appearing in Micheaux's movies and confirms that Micheaux filmed throughout Roanoke during the period 1921-23. While in Roanoke, she co-starred with Evelyn Preer in *Birthingright* and

*The Conjure Woman*. Sewell also appeared in the *House Behind the Cedars*. It is Sewell's assessment that Micheaux's film production company advanced rapidly and gained considerable production experience as well as financial success. Due to the company's success in Roanoke, Sewell followed Micheaux to New York where she continued to perform character roles and co-starred in many of Micheaux's films shot at the Paramount Studio in the Bronx.

Oliver Hill, a retired civil rights lawyer who now lives in Richmond, Virginia, corroborates many of Sewell's memories. In an interview, Mr. Hill remembered that Micheaux filmed a lawn party and allowed Hill a walk-on appearance in *The House Behind the Cedars* sometime between 1920 and 1921. Hill recalls that Micheaux's films were financed in part by Roanokers who bought stock in the Oscar Micheaux Film Corporation. He added that Micheaux lived in the Hampton hotel, a well-known black Hotel located on 1st street, and an area where it believed that most of Micheaux's scenes were shot. Another locale that provided

many of the interior scenes for Micheaux's films was the home of Bradford and Lelia Pentecost, then of 401 Gilmer Avenue located in the Gainsboro Neighborhood, a then prosperous African American community in Roanoke. Hill was



Evelyn Preer, Lawrence Chenault, and unidentified actress from *The Conjure Woman* (1926)

reared in this house with the Pentecosts, who served as his foster parents. The Pentecost house still stands, and there is an effort among Roanoke's African American community to have the house designated as an historical site.

Micheaux's connection to Roanoke are similarly affirmed by Robbie Board and Alice Roberts, who continue to reside on the 400 block of Gilmer Avenue. Their father, Dr. J.H. Roberts, provided them with their history of Micheaux.

As we examine the importance of Micheaux's Roanoke connection, we must consider that Micheaux was greatly influenced by Booker T. Washington, an African American leader who espoused the philosophy of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. With the Booker T. Washington National Monument located in nearby Hardy, Virginia his birthplace many in Roanoke's African American community view this proximity as historically relevant to Micheaux's presence in Roanoke.

*Aukram Burton is an educator and media artist. In collaboration with Eva Darcel Walters, Curator of the Harrison Museum of African American Culture in Roanoke, he is writing an article on Micheaux activities in Roanoke. For more information, contact: Aukram Burton, P.O. Box 561883, Charlotte, North Carolina 28256, (704) 549-4109, aukram@ramimages.com*

# Conferences

**June 1-5, 1998, Fifth Domitor Conference, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.** Conference activities will take place in the Madison Building of the LOC complex, especially in the Mary Pickford Theater. For conference information contact: David Francis or Patrick Loughney, Motion Picture Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. USA 20540.

**July 3-5, 1998, Screen Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Scotland.** Sessions begin on Friday afternoon July 3, 1998 followed by a welcoming reception. Events are scheduled from 9am-6pm Saturday and Sunday 9am-3pm. For more information contact: Caroline Bevin, Screen, Gilmorehill Centre for Theatre, Film and TV, Glasgow University, G12 8QQ, Scotland, United Kingdom, Fax: 0141-330-3515, E-mail: c.bevin@tfts.arts.gla.ac.uk.

**July 10-12, 1998, Annual Conference on Television, Video and Feminism, Console-ing Passions, University of Western Sydney, Parramatta Campus, Sydney, Australia.** The conference welcomes papers, panels and workshops on television, video and feminism: Independent video and video art; Cultural and political history; Race, gender, sexuality, class; Non-fiction and fiction TV; Guerrilla media; Technology and delivery; Policy, regulation, censorship; Global issues/ geopolitics; Children's media; Identity politics; Interactive media/new media; Audience; Media education/pedagogy; Regional and local voices.

For additional information contact:  
Jackie.Cook@unisa.edu.au or Helen.Nixon@unisa.edu.au,  
University of South Australia, St. Bernard's Road, Magill,  
South Australia 5072. Phone: 61-88-302-4519  
Fax: 61-88-302-4745.

**August 5-8, 1998, University Film and Video Association (UFVA) 52nd Annual Conference, "Film and Video Education for the Next Millennium," School of Filmmaking, North Carolina School of the Arts, Winston-Salem, NC.** For information: P.O. Box 12189, Winston-Salem, N.C. 27117-2189, Phone: (336) 770-1330, Fax: (336) 770-1339, E-mail: jackmj@film19.ncarts.edu.

**August 7-9, 1998, Third Annual Oscar Micheaux Film Festival, Gregory, South Dakota.** For more information contact: Richard Papousek or Francie Johnson (605) 835-8002/8391.

**December 6-9, 1998, "Technologies of Moving Images," Stockholm, Sweden.** The conference is organized by the Institute of Futures Studies and Department of Cinema Studies Stockholm University. The emphasis will be on the inter-relationships between technologies, style and reception: continuities and/or ruptures: the representational interface between technologies telegraph, telephone, television, video, computer and self-reflexive films; technologies and gender, and technologies and bodies. Other key

words are: attractions, narrative vehicles, documentaries, and monitoring devices.

Keynote addresses will be given by Lisa Cartwright, Don Crafton, Emily Godbey, Tom Gunning, Mikhail Lampolski, Trond Lundemo, Peter Lunenfeld, Stephen Mamber, Lev Manovich, Michael Renov, Lynn Spigel, Roman Timenchik, Yuri Tsivian and William Uricchio. Their texts will be published by University of California Press in an anthology edited by Jan Olsson.

For additional information contact: Conference co-ordinator, Elaine King, Department of Cinema Studies, Box 27062, 10251, Stockholm, Sweden, Fax: 46-8-665-0723, E-mail: elaine.king@mail.film.su.se.

**January 28-30, 1999, Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference on Film and Literature, Violence in Film and Literature, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.** Abstracts of papers (approximately 250 words, with an explicit thesis) and panel proposals (specify panel, title, chair and participants) must be submitted by October 1, 1998 to: Sharon Gray, Administrator, Center for Professional Development, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida 32306-1640, Phone: (850) 644-2655, Fax: (850) 644-2589, E-mail: sgray@cpd.fsu.edu.

**April 15-18, 1999, Society for Cinema Studies Conference, West Palm Beach, Florida.** The Black Caucus is currently proposing a variety of workshops and prospective panels for the conference addressing: Co-opting the Black Aesthetic, Music Videos, African American Literature into Film Adaptations, Alternative Distribution, African Film Industry, Slavery on Film, The South and Film, New Technologies and the Future of African American cinema, Teaching from a Marginalized Perspective and Its Politics, et. al. For more information contact: Black Caucus co-chairs Jacqueline Stewart and Frances Gatewood at the SCS Website: <http://www.cinemastudies.org/conf.html>.

## Bibliography Update

**Identity and Betrayal: The Symbol of the Unconquered and Oscar Micheaux's Biographical Legend** by Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence from *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of US Cinema* edited by Daniel Bernardi, published by Rutgers University Press (New Jersey), 1996.

**Black Women Film and Video Artists, edited by Jacqueline Bobo of the University of California, Santa Barbara, published by Routledge (New York).** Black women film and video makers have been producing shorts, documentaries and films since the early part of this century. Unfortunately, not only has their work been overlooked by distributors, but critical reviews have been few and far between. Conceived to redress that omission, *Black Women Film and Video Artists* is the first comprehensive history and analysis of this genre.



# Minutes for Oscar Micheaux Society Meeting

Society for Cinema Studies Conference —  
April 5, 1998, San Diego, California

The meeting was convened at 8:00 am with Theola V. Gardner, Jane Gaines, Phyllis Klotman, Charles Musser, Rob Silberman, Louise Spence, Clay Steinman, Charles Stewart, and Dan Streible attending.

## I. Oscar Micheaux Film Festival

The dates for this year's Micheaux Film Festival will be August 7-9. Society members are encouraged to attend.

Part of the discussion concerned the appearance of James McDaniel (Lt. Fancy from *NYPD Blue*) at last year's Festival, noted in the last Newsletter. His appearance was connected to a possible film project based on Micheaux's life—but Pearl Bowser reported that there was nothing definite to report

## II. African American Museum

Pearl Bowser curated a series for the African-American Film Institute, housed in the Africana Studies Program at Wayne State (Robert Christman, Chair). The series presented materials produced in Detroit and included a life jazz performance created especially for the production

## III. *Symbol of the Unconquered* Restoration

Turner Classic Movies is restoring *Symbol of the Unconquered*, with a Max Roach soundtrack. It will premiere in New York City; the date has not yet been announced.

There will be a seven film package, and the promotion should reach museums, archives, etc. The film will be at MOMA. There was a discussion of trying to convince Turner to make the package available free, or at a low cost, to all the schools where African-American cinema is taught.

## IV. Miscellaneous News

- A. There is a Jack Johnson Society in Galveston, TX.
- B. Stanley Nelson is making a film on African-American newspapers; Half-Nelson Productions, Brooklyn.
- C. The Newsletter is going on the Internet.

# News of Interest

The Oscar Micheaux Newsletter is on the World Wide Web. The Film & Video Program at Duke University is in the process of placing past newsletters on the web as part of the Film & Video web-site. So far, newsletter number 6 is available and back issues should be appearing soon. The address is:  
<http://www.duke.edu/web/film/Micheaux>

*Ninth Street*, a film by Kevin Willmott, directed by Tim Rebman and produced by Rick Cowan, will receive its world premiere June 5, 1998 at the Historic Gem Theatre in Kansas City. The *Ninth Street* Premier is sponsored by the African American film Society, the KAN Film Festival and the Film Society of Greater Kansas City.

*Ninth Street* centers on the characters who live, strive and die on an historic street in Junction City, Kansas. This 9th Street was a one-block strip of black-owned bars, nightclubs and small businesses that was called the "Harlem of Kansas." For more information call Martin English at the KAN Film Festival, (816) 333-0814.

# Screenings

*Within Our Gates* as part of the National Film Registry Tour sponsored by the Library of Congress and the National Film Preservation Board, The Castro Theatre, San Francisco, California, January 25, 1998. Accompanied by Robert Vaughn on the Mighty Wurlitzer. Introduced by film scholar, restorer and author Scott Simmon.

*Within Our Gates*, as part of the DoubleTake Documentary Film Festival sponsored by DoubleTake Magazine/Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, The Carolina Theatre, Durham, North Carolina, April 4, 1998. Musical Accompaniment by Chip Crawford. Introduced by Charlene Regester.

*Lying Lips*, as part of the Fourth Annual Black Diaspora Film Festival sponsored by the St. Joseph's Historical Foundation, The Hayti Cultural Center, Durham, North Carolina, February 21, 1998.

## Errata

In issue #6, we incorrectly listed Ed Buttins as the poet/playwright helping Grant Harper Reid with his play *Hot Feet*. The correct name is Ed Bullins.



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*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 others 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 others who were active in early African American cinema.

*The Oscar Micheaux Newsletter* is a publication of the Film & Video Program at Duke University. We welcome your contributions, questions and comments. Information and articles for editorial review should be sent to:

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Film & Video Program  
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