Me and Oscar Micheaux: An Interview with LeRoy Collins

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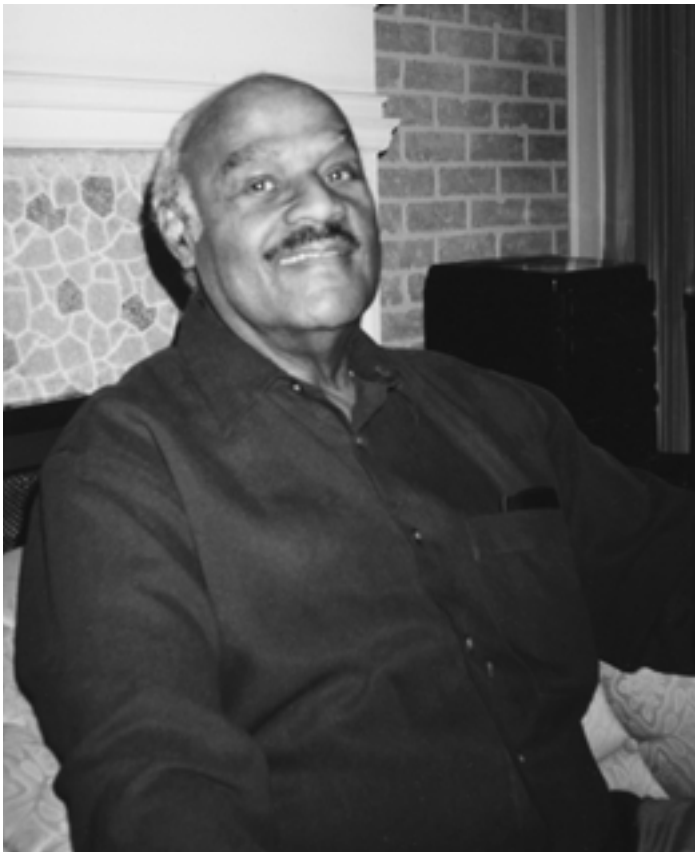

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Me and Oscar

An Interview with

LeRoy Collins was a movie star once, only once. But the movie was *The Betrayal,* the very last production by the African-American director Oscar Micheaux, shot in Chicago and parts of the Midwest in 1947. That makes Collins one of the last witnesses to an era and a man whose mystique has never been greater. Moreover, the part Collins played was Micheaux himself—that is, the lead character, as drawn from Micheaux's 1943 novel, *The Wind from Nowhere,* and whose name in the film is Martin Eden, in honor of Micheaux's literary hero Jack London.

Collins was in his early twenties, attending Roosevelt College in Chicago, after having served in the military in World War II. Though he had only acted passingly ("In my senior year, I was on the high school football team, and when the season ended I got bored and joined an amateur theatrical group at a community center"), he was picked out of a line of job applicants. "You are Martin Eden," Micheaux flatly told Collins, upon hiring him, "and Martin Eden was me."

The son of emancipated slaves, Oscar Micheaux was raised in Illinois, but as a young man he homesteaded on the plains of South Dakota, writing novels. The novels made him wealthy, and he turned film director.

Micheaux ultimately published seven novels, and between 1919 and 1948 made over 40 films with "all-Negro" casts that catered largely to segregated audiences. He produced, directed, and wrote the scripts of his films. While entertainment-oriented, Micheaux's films insistently explored issues such as poverty, courtroom injustice, miscegenation, and prejudice. *Within Our Gates* (1919) was made as an explicit response to D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation,* while *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) excoriated the Ku Klux Klan. Micheaux's 1925 film *Body and Soul* launched the screen career of Paul Robeson.

Micheaux is increasingly celebrated as a pioneering individualist who attacked racism in his films while working outside the official, segregated industry. The Directors Guild of America honored him posthumously in 1986. The Producers Guild gives an annual Oscar Micheaux award, and the pioneering African-American filmmaker even has his own star on Hollywood's "Walk of Fame." His life and career have become a growth industry for academic scholars.

Like many Micheaux films, *The Betrayal* was concerned with interracial romance. The film had a reserved-seat premiere in New York City, where Micheaux advertised it as "The Greatest Negro Photo-

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Micheaux

LeRoy Collins

Play of All Time." It is the only Micheaux production to be critiqued in the *New York Times,* where Thomas M. Pryor, in his brief 26 June 1948 review, found it noteworthy that its story "contemplates at considerable length the relations between Negroes and whites as members of the community as well as partners in marriage." Yet Pryor faulted *The Betrayal* as "often confusing" with "sporadically poor photography and consistently amateurish performances."

But the film met with great success before "Negro only" audiences in the Deep South, relates Collins. Only three years later, Micheaux would be dead, and the era of "race pictures" and segregated theaters began its slow fade. The star of *The Betrayal* never acted professionally again.

After *The Betrayal,* Collins served for 20 years as principal of the George W. Goethals Upper Grade Center public school in Chicago. He still resides there, in the South Side neighborhood of Chatham. His recollections of Oscar Micheaux and the making of *The Betrayal* are all the more fascinating, given that all prints of the film—like so many other Micheaux productions—have disappeared. In his mid-seventies today, Collins is still trim, and still sports a thin mustache, like the strikingly handsome young man whose face stares out from the lobby cards of *The Betrayal*. "Playing Oscar Micheaux" started, for him, as little more than an intriguing summer job.

PATRICK MCGILLIGAN*: What happened when you met Oscar Micheaux for the first time?*

LEROY COLLINS: During the summer of 1947—even though I was in summer school—I was looking around for a job to supplement my income. Someone found out they were going to do a movie in the city, and they were interviewing people for different types of jobs—stagehands, prop men, and whatnot. A couple of us who took the same classes went over to the studio they had rented, on 29th Street, and they started interviewing us for these various jobs. I was called aside by one of the assistant directors who said, "We'd like you to read for a part."

I was taken over to meet Mr. Micheaux. He asked me some questions about myself, and then I read for him. All he said was, "I want you to read for a part that you might be able to play." I said O.K. So I read a page, and then he had me read another page. Then he looked at his wife and said, "I think this is the one." That was it. I was cast.

Why do you think Micheaux chose you?
I got the part because I looked like Oscar Micheaux wanted me to look.

Did he gave you any advice for your audition?
Nothing. Just: "Read it in your own style."

Were you being camera-tested at the same time?
No. I just read for him, and he was the sole evaluator.

What did he look like?
He was in his sixties, elderly, mature, with salt-and-pepper hair. He always wore a suit and tie—and I think maybe he smoked an occasional cigar. He had some physical problems; he kind of limped, and if I recall correctly, sometimes he carried a cane. He had medicine that he had to take.

He was staying in a nice hotel on 51st on the South Side with his entourage. I went there later to discuss my contract and sign it. He had made money on his books and his earlier pictures—especially because there was no middleman on his pictures, and he was the distributor—and he had a chauffeur with a big black limousine who was also a kind of general handyman and assistant.

You said his wife, the actress Alice B. Russell, was with him when you met him.
She was always with him. Alice was refined, well-educated. She had a role in the film, and she would help by holding the script and keeping track of scenes. She was always there on the set, and would correct any lines that weren't being done right.

What was this studio like, that he had rented for filming?
It was an old radio news studio. He had furniture and equipment brought in for the filming, and then he used buildings outside for shots of Chicago. Sometimes we went to Wisconsin or Michigan for scenes, especially for the farms and ranches of South Dakota.

Can you describe—for people reading about The Betrayal *for the first time in this interview—your role in the context of the larger story of the film?*
This picture was the autobiography of his life. I played him, Oscar Micheaux—although the character's name in the script was Martin Eden. I was the lead actor. I had to memorize a big thick script, and I was in 75 percent of the scenes.

Weren't you daunted by the challenge of playing the director in his own life story?
No—although I was told later that 40 or 50 people before me had read for the role, people like Oscar Brown, who was a well-known writer, singer, and all-around entertainer.

Had you yourself ever heard of Oscar Micheaux, prior to meeting him?
Never heard of him.

Had you seen his movies?
Like everyone else, I went to movies. I may have seen his, but I didn't attach his name to any that I saw.

Had you read any of his books? Had you read The Wind from Nowhere, *the book on which the film is partly based?*
Not beforehand. I did eventually read *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* and *The Wind from Nowhere*.

In order for you to play the part, didn't Micheaux require you to read his books and do some research about his life?
No. He didn't say anything about that to me, or to anyone else in the cast. Some of the cast were professional actors from Chicago who were in radio. One was a character actor who had been in Hollywood pictures. One young lady I knew because we grew up together. Another actress, Yvonne Machen, had been on the stage in New York; she had played the lead in *Anna Lucasta*. Harris Gaines, another lead, had had a top role in a radio drama in New York.

We had three or four weeks of rehearsal before we shot the film—just reading through the script, because it was a long-drawn-out movie. The cast was all there, at a YMCA or community center he rented out. There were maybe 20 of us who had big speaking parts. We sat around with the script, but it was like a theater situation, and those who had lines would come up to the front of the room and stand. I was up there most of the time, because I had more involvement than everyone else. He'd intervene to tell us to speak up, or read a line a certain way; he'd correct you. He wanted to get it down to a fine point before you got into costume, because he was spending a great deal of his own fortune to do this movie.

What was his manner with actors?
Very gruff. Not what I would call polished. He was very to the point, matter-of fact, no put-on. He didn't

have any patience with people. If he wanted something done, he wanted it done correctly, right then and there. He knew exactly what he wanted—and his manner wasn't pleasant. He'd shout at people. He never shouted at me—not once. He was gentle with me, with the leading ladies, and with two or three other ladies. I think he was quite the guy with the ladies.

Why do you say that?
Because he put so many women into the story of his life—they are out of context sometimes, just in one scene sometimes. There was the white lady in North Dakota he was in love with, and a black lady in Chicago whom he marries, and another lady in another place that he's romancing . . . etcetera. It wasn't done in the same way they do things now, but you got the idea that this guy wanted people to know he saw quite a few ladies in his day.

But you didn't see any evidence of him womanizing during the filming?
No, he was older, and all business. His attitude was, "This is my money we're spending, and let's do it quick and get it done with."

I remember he never called us by our real names. It was always by the cast name. I was Martin. From the first moment he laid eyes on me he didn't call me anything other than the name of the character in his book. It was always Martin this, Martin that. I just assumed that identity as far as he was concerned. I don't think he knew my other name except when he wrote the check out.

Your character was named Martin Eden after the Jack London novel—did Mr. Micheaux ever talk about his affinity for Jack London?
No, but it was in his books. If you read his books, you'd see that. Most of his autobiography, and most of his early life, involved living out on the Dakotas on ranches. He was the only black in the area, and he started writing books, and I think he more or less used Jack London as his image. That idea motivated him. There he lived a sort of Jack London, isolated existence—a very different kind of existence for a young black man at that time.

Did he confide anything in you about his life at that time?
No, and he never referred to the fact that this was his life.

Wasn't that a bit odd, considering?
Well, everyone knew it, so there was really no reason for him to say it. He said to me, "You are Martin Eden, and Martin Eden was me," and that was it. We understood: "This is my life story. I lived the way Martin Eden did. These are the people I associated with, and these are the life experiences I had," and the dramatization of that story is the only thing that changed. He fictionalized parts of it, built it up, although some of these things possibly did happen.

You say he was kind to you.
He could be gracious, if he liked you. If he liked you, he had charm, and I was one of the ones he liked. I was allowed to improvise, for example, and I remember that the other actors wore makeup but he stipulated that at no time was I ever to use any makeup. Everyone did, but me.

Why?
I don't know what his reason was. He said it wasn't necessary for me to have makeup on. I guess he wanted me to look more rugged, like he was as a young person.

Did he give you any acting advice?
He told you a few camera clues: "Never look at the camera"—things like that.

That's a pretty good clue, actually!
It all came natural to me, and that's why he liked me, I guess. He said to me, "Be yourself," and I was pretty much natural in the part. I could have survived in the part except that some of the surrounding cast were so weak because they were amateurs, and plus the parts were so badly written. I said to myself, "I can't talk that way. It's not me." So I went ahead and improvised a little, and he never interrupted me. But he didn't let the others improvise. He'd shout at them if they did.

Did he compliment you if you did it right?
His attitude was, "I expected you to do that." One day the professional actor from Hollywood said to me, in front of the whole cast, that I had a marvelous memory for having committed the script to memory—which I had. But Mr. Micheaux's attitude was, "I expected that."

What did he do on the set? Did he walk around, gesture, look through the camera?
He did everything. He would set up the angle. He would direct the movements. He'd sit on a stool and watch, but he would be in command, directing the troops.

He had a crew there to do the actual filming. It wasn't a big crew, but it was a crew. A crew to do the filming, another crew to move the sets around, and another to do the audio part. All the crew, the camera-

man and whatnot, were white, incidentally. He was not very patient with them either.

Why were they white?
Oh, those were union jobs.

Did you have any sense that it was a low-budget production? Were you paid fairly?
I wouldn't know what was fair. There was no job I could have gotten as a college student that would have paid me more money.

Was the budget tight in any way?
Probably, but I had no feeling about that, because I had no experience—no frame of reference. He rented a lot of things out.

How was the camerawork? Was the cameraman good, and was Micheaux interested in the visual quality?
It was pretty good, but Mr. Micheaux would usually try to do things in the quickest way and the cheapest way. By the time we got to the photography we had gone over the script for three or four weeks, and everyone had their parts down to perfection, in terms of memory. He would do as few takes as possible. If he liked it, he'd say, "That's it," and if not, we'd shoot it again.

In the evening he'd have the cast sit down, and they'd run the rushes from the previous day. We'd look at those rushes. If he saw something there he didn't care for, we'd reshoot the scene, because it had been done just the day before. If anything was off, it was reshot the very next day—because the costumes and people were still there.

So he'd try to work quickly, but he was willing to reshoot.
Oh yes. We looked at rushes, and even several months after all the filming was done he had several of us—particularly me, because I was the lead actor—go and shoot a scene that had to be reshot. One of the scenes was on a train, so the assistant director, the cameraman, and some actors and myself went up to the North Shore somewhere and shot a scene on a train that had to be redone. We did that for two or three scenes.

Micheaux himself wasn't there?
No, it was handled by his assistant director.

Considering that The Betrayal *is a lost film, and people can't see it nowadays, can you recall any particular scenes—either good or bad? There must have been some interesting stuff going on in a three-hour-plus movie.*

Yvonne and Harris were very good actors. She played a hellcat, and she acted that role very well. He was her pompous, dignified father, who wanted to break up the marriage of Martin Eden to her sister. They were very effective in their scenes together.

I had to wear a Western costume with a big hat and boots at the beginning of the film. In other scenes, when visiting the city, I'd be wearing a suit. But I remember the Western costume, and being up on a horse at one point, saying goodbye to a friend in the West, and then riding off into the sunset. That was a pretty scene.

There was a scene in which the wife has a gun, and Martin Eden is struggling with her—done first in long shot and then with closeups—a good scene, as I recall. And I remember a scene where I was walking in the Dakotas, and the wind from nowhere—the title of the book—came roaring up. They had huge fans blowing on me, and I was supposed to be walking in one direction, but the wind was so strong that it pushed me back, very realistically—almost like a tornado. It even knocked me on the ground, which it was supposed to do. Things like that I remember, but this was over 50 years ago now.

When was the last time you saw the picture?
I saw it only once, at the premiere here in Chicago. The theater was packed. I went with some of my fraternity brothers, and we slunk down in the last rows.

Mr. Micheaux opened it on Broadway—it was the first all-black movie to play Broadway, but the press clippings were not good. For one thing, they said it was too long and the dialogue was drawn-out. Even though I was in it, I knew that. If I could have improvised better, the picture would have been better, because I had taken speech classes, and I had some success at speechmaking. Even I knew that the dialogue could be improved.

Were the characters speaking in some kind of studied fashion?
The dialogue just didn't come natural to a lot of the characters, and the scenes just went on and on. It was like someone saying, "Here is my philosophy, here is how I feel, and I'm going to say it all through this character right now, all at once."

Was he using the dialogue as a platform for his ideas, is that what you mean?
As I have said to other people, I thought he was a pompous and self-serving man—but I respected him, because he was doing something that very few people

could do. He had the wherewithal and the knowledge to do it, too. He was a very good businessman, but . . .

How about "artist"? How much of an artist was he?
He lacked a true artistic touch. He just related his life experiences and put them into a written form and then brought them into a moving picture format. He depicted life, his life, and things that he wanted to be heard about—but I would be highly critical in terms of quality. In terms of *The Betrayal,* certainly, though the quantity was there; the film was *long*.

He certainly saw himself as an artist.
He did, he did. And he was a pioneer, no question about it. He was bold, saying just what he wanted to say. His attitude was, "Get out of my way—this is what I'm going to do."

I remember one day, we were driving down the road in Michigan, looking for a farmhouse. There must have been four or five cars and trucks in a row, like an Army convoy. He was up front in one car with the cameraman, with me and some actors in the back. He saw the right farmhouse and told the cameraman, "I want a picture of this exterior scene." Well, there were people in the window of that house looking out at this line of cars and trucks—and he yelled at them to get out of the window. Told the people to get out of their own window!

He had boldness, brashness, and I always say he was a—quote—character. He was a unique person for his time.

The advertisements for The Betrayal *seem to court controversy over the interracial romance angle, boasting "The Strangest Love Story Ever Told."*
That was in the 40s, and in most parts of the country that was unacceptable. The theme was very bold for its time—it was a controversial issue—which goes to the genius of the man. How was he going to achieve something that was sensational? *Create* something sensational; that was intentional. He exploited situations in order to gain notoriety, and on the basis of that came his success. He was selling something—and that was his strategy: making a big issue of it, getting people to talk about it. He knew exactly what he was doing.

When they showed *The Betrayal* throughout the South, the lines formed for blocks outside the theaters. I later saw newspaper pictures of the lines. The picture wasn't a hit in New York on Broadway, but it was accepted by the black audience in the South. It only played on Broadway for a week or so, but that was so Mr. Micheaux could advertise "Direct from Broadway" when it played in all those other places.

You have to realize that in this time period blacks could not go to white theaters throughout the South and various other areas, or they could go only on certain days—like only Wednesdays—so Mr. Micheaux rented those theaters after the regular performances were over, at nine or ten o'clock at night, and that's when *The Betrayal* would be shown. That was a hurdle he had to leap—and his greatest attribute, if you ask me. You really have to admire the man. He took on the very formidable task of becoming a distributor at that time, when there were no black distributors. But that is where the money is; the money isn't in making the movie, it's in how you get out and use your resources to distribute it and reap the benefits. He was highly competitive in that sense, and took the movie around like a road show picture, from one town and city to the next.

Did you do any further acting, after The Betrayal*?*
No. That wasn't my dish. It was fun being with the people, and it was fun to make-believe, but it was also hard work. You got up early and you worked all day and when you got home it was dark. It may sound glamorous, but not when you're going through it. After that picture I finished college and then went into my field of education. I was a teacher and junior high school principal, here in Chicago, for 24 years.

Did you ever see or hear from Mr. Micheaux again?
Not really—but I married my leading lady, Myra Stanton. She was my first wife; we are long since divorced. We had gone to the same high school but didn't start dating until we were making the film. Afterward we got married, and then we had to laugh, because for our wedding gift Mr. Micheaux sent us one of his books, signed.

Patrick McGilligan's most recent book is *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (HarperCollins, 2003). His *Backstory 4: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1970s and 1980s* is due from the University of California Press in 2005. He is presently working on a new biography of Oscar Micheaux.

Abstract The mystique of pioneering African-American novelist and film director Oscar Micheaux has never been greater, 50 years after his death. His last film, *The Betrayal,* was made in 1947, and all prints are lost, but Patrick McGilligan tracked down the star of the epic-length film, who played a character based on Micheaux himself, for a revealing interview about the Jackie Robinson of American film.