

Race relations in Hollywood

Turner Classic Movies takes a look back into a time when the film industry focused heavily on an actor's makeup

NEW YORK (AP) — It was filmmaking that took flight on the wings of frustration, the African-American artist's answer to bigotry and stereotypes.

Sometime around 1910, a new genre arose in the infant movie industry. Called "race movies," these films came into being because white Hollywood refused to acknowledge that African Americans were anything more than shufflin', shiny-faced, head-scratchin' simpletons with bugged-out eyes who leaned on brooms and spoke bad English.

Besides, the Mayers, Goldwyns and Warners of Hollywood mused, African Americans could not possibly write, direct and produce films.

Producers such as William Foster and George and Noble Johnson, and directors such as Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams Jr., proved them wrong. Their melodramas, detective stories and musicals gave African Americans dignity and realism that was absent in Hollywood.

On Wednesday, beginning at 8 p.m. EDT and continuing through the night, Turner Classic Movies will show six "race movies," starring Paul Robeson and Herbert Jeffrey (the African-American Gene Autry), on its cable channel as part of a month-long series, "A Separate Cinema."

The series, running each Wednesday night in July, features the 1994 documentary *Midnight Ramble*, about Micheaux and the race movie genre, and 29 films starring such actors as Robeson, Jeffrey, Williams, Josephine Baker, Mantan Moreland, Ralph Cooper, Lena Horne, William Greaves and Lincoln Perry (Stepin Fetchit).

The series debuted July 1 with the world premiere of the restored version of Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, a 1921 silent feature about ethnic pride with a scathing portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan.

Oddly, so-called "race movies," many of which have been lost, were inspired by D.W. Griffith's glorification of the Klan, *The Birth of a Nation*. The 1915 epic, which the American Film Institute questionably lists as one of the greatest American movies of all time, gives a naive and one-sided view of Reconstruction, and portrays African-American men as ugly animals who love to rape white women.

A year after Griffith's tale hit the screens, the Johnsons came out with *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition*, a movie about a black oil baron. Micheaux converted his novel, *The Homesteader*, into a movie in 1917, and African-American film companies began popping up throughout the United States in places such as Omaha, Chicago, New York and Los

Angeles, showing movies in African-American-owned theaters or at special screenings in segregated movie houses.

The genre's diversity is documented in the TCM series. Mostly B-movies, there are Westerns, like Wednesday night's *The Bronze Buckaroo* (1938), *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939) and *Two Gun Man From Harlem* (1938) — filmed at one of the few dude ranches in California to allow African Americans; musicals, such as *Juke Joint* (1947), to be shown July 15, and *Duke Is Tops*, the 1938 movie in which Lena Horne made her film debut, to be televised July 29.

There also are boxing movies, like the 1937 Joe Louis film *The Spirit of Youth*, airing July 29; crime stories and mysteries — *Miracle in Harlem* and *Midnight Shadow*, both telecast July 22; and loads of melodramas and dramas, tackling such knotty subjects as domestic abuse, education and lynching.

In Wednesday night's 1936 movie *The Song of Freedom*, Robeson portrays a London dockworker, John Zinga, who longs to discover his African heritage. The film, with a score by Eric Ansell, showcases Robeson's powerful bass.

Like many films in the genre, it presents African Americans as dignified, intelligent people who often have good taste and values. Zinga and his wife (Elizabeth Welch), live in a simple but nicely appointed home with books and porcelain lining living-room shelves. They treat one another with tenderness and respect. And, as in most "race

movies," they speak in standard Eastern English as opposed to the inarticulate utterances so many Hollywood movies employed at the time — and still encourage today.

In all "race movies," viewers will see that the African-American B-movies weren't too different from white ones. There were at times good, compelling story lines and occasional inspired camera work. Many were done on thin budgets and appear cheap; others show artistry.

There were handsome, debonair leading men; gorgeous, elegant leading ladies; evil, diabolical bad guys; outrageously funny comedians; talented singers and dancers; actors whose performances would be at home on a Shakespearean stage.

The only difference is that white filmmakers and producers were allowed a place in American film history.

Ephraim Katz's *The Film Encyclopedia* is one of the few books to reference African-American film pioneers. But *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, by David Thomson, and Gerald Mas's *A Short History of the Movies* both ignore the contributions of African American, including Robeson and Horne.

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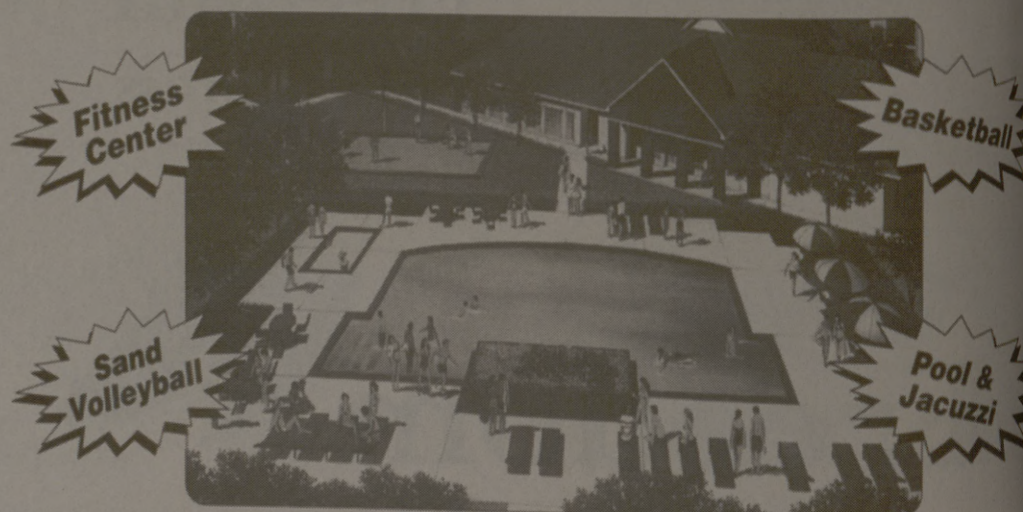
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