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THE AMERICAN FILM INSTITUTE

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"TREASURES FROM THE PAST: EIGHT SILENT AND EARLY SOUND FILMS"

THE EMPEROR JONES (1933)

Directed by Dudley Murphy. Adapted by DuBose Hayward from the play by Eugene O'Neill. Photog: Ernest Haller. With: Paul Robeson (Brutus Jones), Dudley Digges (Smithers), Frank Wilson (Jeff), Fredi Washington (Undine), Ruby Elzy (Dolly). (72 mins. Courtesy of Janus Films and John Krimsky)

ST. LOUIS BLUES, A documentary on the great blues singer Bessie Smith, directed by Dudley Murphy. (1928. 17 mins. Print courtesy of the Department of Film, Museum of Modern Art.)

The Emperor Jones brought Paul Robeson to the talking screen for the first time, in the role of a Pullman porter who, through sheer nerve and bluster, proclaims himself Emperor of a small West Indian island. The movie is a modest, independent production, which looks every one of its 43 years; yet, for those who remember Robeson's public beginnings as one of the great figures of the Negro Renaissance of the 1920's, it is a deeply moving experience, recalling a half century of American history.

Paul Robeson first played Brutus Jones in 1924 when he replaced Charles S. Gilpin in the original Provincetown Players' production on the New York stage. Author Eugene O'Neill said at the time that his Jones had given him "the most complete satisfaction an author can get--that of seeing his creation born into flesh and blood."

The following year, Robeson repeated his triumph on the London stage. According to biographer Edwin P. Hoyt, Robeson was puzzled by the dramatic critics who wrote thousands of words analyzing his acting abilities down to the smallest degree. "He knew he had very little but his innate character to express." If that is true, it explains a great deal of his success in Jones, for Robeson's personal majesty, and the conviction of his own idealism, are a powerful contrast to the "Emperor's" regression from a civilized state of consciousness through the primitive state of his personal subconscious back to the collective subconscious which O'Neill meant to symbolize the Negro race.

Audiences everywhere knew that Paul Robeson, son of a Presbyterian minister who had escaped from slavery in 1860, was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Rutgers University, twice an all-American football hero, an alumnus of Columbia University Law School, and a member of the New York Bar. Within a few years after his first performance as Brutus Jones, he was also to establish an international reputation as a concert singer and an actor in film and theater. Thus, underlying the sheer theatricality of The Emperor Jones was the suggestion that this black titan (who had won his honors on a white field in competition with white players), by taking the part of Brutus Jones, believed that a black could unconsciously shed his whole veneer of culture and flee into a world of voodoo and blind fear. In later years, Paul Robeson became very conscious of the social implication of the characters he played, and for more than 20 years, his life was shaped by a will to show blacks, and oppressed people everywhere, that they needed to fight for freedom, not of the sort granted to them as a concession, but as their right.



O'Neill's original play took place on a single night, but through it Jones gives hints of his life during the preceeding 20 years. This material has been somewhat compressed, but is more or less faithfully rendered in just the last half-hour of the film. The first 40 minutes of screen time consists of new material written by DuBose Hayward, the author of Porgy, which sketches the 20 preceeding years of Jones' life in chronological order. Hayward described his method of adapting O'Neill's play to the screen as follows:

This job presented a rather unusual problem to the adaptor. What it required was a piece of straight creative writing which would preface the play, and which, when completed, would merge with the play without any break or jolt in story or characterization. I first analyzed O'Neill's play, especially the opening scene with Jones and Smithers, and from what scraps of background thrown out in the exposition that he gave me, I constructed a framework of Jones' early life. To this framework I added the character of the earlier Jones, as I had imagined it, and by throwing this character into contact with the disintegrating power of our white civilization, broke Jones down from the rather simple Southern Negro to the shrewd, grafting Negro of our own big business pirate. The incidents which I used in the early part of the screen play, I either got from O'Neill's exposition, or built in to reveal character under action, or to lend the swift inevitable progression so necessary to a screen story.

The effect of Hayward's treatment is to change The Emperor Jones from a study in racial fear as seen in the crumbling of a collective Negro mind to the tragic life portrait of one individual. Still, the original theme of the play comes out in some of the cinematic touches, such as the dissolve between the first scene in the film--a primitive tribal dance--and the second scene, a gospel meeting.

The Emperor Jones was produced by two young independents, John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran. They had wanted to film on location in South Carolina, but their inability to secure first class accommodations for the star forced the production back to the confines of Paramount's Long Island studios. Much of the directorial style is therefore motivated by the realities of low-budget sound stage realism. The director of record is Dudley Murphy, an American who had collaborated with Fernand Leger on Ballet Mecanique in 1924 and who directed both Bessie Smith in St. Louis Blues and Duke Ellington in Black and Tan. According to Krimsky, however, Murphy was "too slow" to stay within the stringent production budget, and Cecil B. DeMille's smarter brother William, a master of intimate studio shooting, was brought in to finish up.

Alexander Woollcott once compared Paul Robeson to the giant California redwoods, and as the political controversy which once surrounded the actor is gradually forgotten, Woollcott's simile again seems fitting. "it is apparent to us all," said BBC commentator Benny Green, "that Robeson is one of those archetypal artists of the 20th century. He is one of those rare people who can, through some miraculous alchemy of the spirit, reach out, and within the scope of a single gesture or phrase, touch the hearts of both galleryites looking for a good time and intellectuals probing for The Message. When he sings I hear the unsullied expression of the human spirit."

Notes by David Shepard