

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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Body and Soul (1925)

Opening Night: Wednesday 17 March 2021

Music Score By: Wycliffe Gordon

Musicians: Wycliffe Gordon composer, conductor, trombone and vocals; Wess Anderson Alto sax; Ted Nash Alto sax, clarinet, flute; Victor Goines tenor sax, soprano sax, clarinet; Walter Blanding tenor sax; Joe Temperley baritone sax; Ron Westray, Vincent Gardner and Andre Hayward trombone; Bob Stewart tuba; Chris Jaudes, Ryan Kisor, Marcus Printup and Mike Rodriguez trumpet; Cyrus Chestnut and Aaron Diehl piano; Reginald Veal bass, vocals; Herlin Riley drums, vocals; Sachal Vasandani solo vocals.

Body and Soul is a radical film both artistically and politically. Producer-director-writer Oscar Micheaux provided Paul Robeson with his motion picture debut, hiring the rising Black star for three weeks at \$100 per week, plus a percentage of the gross after the picture made more than \$40,000 (it never did). The resulting film was one of the highpoints in both artists' work. Micheaux elicited an outstanding performance from Robeson, whose versatility is on display playing twin brothers – the Reverend Isiaah Jenkins, an escaped convict posing as a minister, and Sylvester, an aspiring inventor. Double roles, more common in the silent era than they are today, gave actors an opportunity to display their range and talents – John Barrymore had already played the *doppelgänger* role of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in 1920 for Paramount. Robeson embraced a similar task for this production: opposites in every way, both characters are intrigued by the same woman, Isabelle – whom the pastor rapes and robs but the inventor marries.

The film's romantic female lead is played by Julia Theresa Russell, a beauty queen making her acting debut. As Isabelle, Russell's performance and make-up (still the actor's responsibility in this period) are among the film's weakest elements. Micheaux had "discovered" several female stars (such as Evelyn Preer and Shingzie Howard), and generally was very successful in getting solid performances out of non-professionals. To balance these novices, Micheaux hired two experienced acting veterans, Lawrence Chenault (as Curly Hinds) and Mercedes Gilbert (as Isabelle's mother Martha Jane). Chenault, a star of stage and screen, had played the villainous Driscoll in Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920). Gilbert, here making her screen debut, would go on to have a significant stage career, playing the lead in Langston Hughes's play *Mulatto* during much of its Broadway run in 1936. She also became director of the 700-member 'Colored Actors and Performers Association'.

With the potential exception of Spike Lee, Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) remains the most prolific African-American director of feature films. He grew up on a farm in Illinois, and was a Pullman porter on the railroad, then a homesteader in South Dakota. In 1913 he published his autobiographical first novel, *The Conquest*. In the wake of World War I he moved into motion picture production with *The Homesteader* (1919), a film adaptation of his recently published novel of that title. For the next thirty years, Micheaux produced and directed low-budget 'race films' intended for Black audiences in segregated theatres.

By the time he made *Body and Soul*, Micheaux was the best-known Black filmmaker in America, routinely engaging issues that were controversial yet compelling to the African-American community. In his much praised *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), Micheaux's attack on the resurgent Ku Klux

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Klan not only referenced D.W. Griffith's infamous *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) but also reflected the concerns and attitudes of the nation's Black weekly newspapers, which devoted extensive news coverage to the Klan's activities. His pictures frequently functioned as creative re-imaginings of well-known cultural works, either straightforward adaptations – as with *The House Behind the Cedars* (1925), which was based on Charles Chesnut's 1900 novel – or more oblique reworkings.

Only two of Micheaux's silent films – *Body and Soul* and *Within Our Gates* (1920) – survive in essentially complete form. Both films have radical narrative structures combining dreams and flashbacks, which proved particularly troublesome to critics. The more recently available *Within Our Gates* suggests that past efforts to understand *Body and Soul* as a conventional realist work have been badly misguided. Such efforts led historians to characterize surviving prints as heavily censored and somewhat incoherent versions of a lost masterpiece. While brief sections of the film do appear to be missing, these do not affect the film's overall coherence.

That Micheaux was one of the most formally innovative and representationally sophisticated filmmakers of the silent era has been little recognized by critics trying to judge the film against the Hollywood codes of conventional easy-to-follow storytelling, which it obviously violates. In fact, the extreme rearrangements of space-time elements have important political meanings in both Micheaux films cited here: in *Within Our Gates* (1920), the truth can only be suppressed at tremendous cost, and even then will assert itself at unexpected moments, while one of *Body and Soul's* messages is that ordinary African-American citizens must – as Martha Jane does only at the very end – “wake up”. Indeed, given the call-and-response practices by moviegoers in Black-only theatres, Martha Jane finally responds to the audiences' impassioned cries for her to open her eyes and see what is obvious to everyone in the seats.

Body and Soul is an anti-realist text in one other way that has gone unrecognized. It is a critical engagement with three plays by White authors, all of which featured Paul Robeson in New York stagings during 1924. As Hazel Carby has pointed out, one strand of the film references Nan Bagby Stephens's play *Roseanne*, in which Robeson played a corrupt preacher who is forgiven and reformed by a woman in his congregation. The film also provides sustained parallels with Eugene O'Neill's two 'race plays', *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillun' Got Wings*, both of which starred Robeson in alternate week-long runs with the Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village.

Micheaux rejected any pretense of verisimilitude and narrative coherence in the interests of grappling with these plays. The film's principal storyline merges *Roseanne* with *The Emperor Jones*. Like Brutus Jones, Rev. Isiaah Jenkins is an escaped convict who assumes a mystical/religious identity which allows him to take charge of a Black community, where he abuses his power until, after a few years of exploitation, the local population finally rebels and tracks him down as he tries to escape. But unlike *Roseanne's* pastor, the Right Reverend Jenkins does not reform. The film's secondary story involves the successful work of Sylvester (Robeson) – and a conscious inversion of the destructive relationship depicted in O'Neill's *All God's Chillun'*.

Micheaux shot most of *Body and Soul* in the New York area in November 1924, but it was not released until late the following year. It is Micheaux's only silent film to survive with the original English intertitles.

By **Charles Musser**, Professor of Film & Media Studies at Yale University.

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BODY AND SOUL (Micheaux Film Corporation, US 1925)

Dir. Oscar Micheaux | USA | 1925 | N/C PG | 1h 42m | English intertitles

With: Paul Robeson (Rt. Rev. Isiaah T. Jenkins / Sylvester), Mercedes Gilbert (Martha Jane), Lawrence Chenault (Yellow Curly Hinds), Julia Theresa Russell (Isabelle), Marshall Rodgers (*saloon owner*), Chester A. Alexander (Deacon Simpkins), Walter Cornick (Brother Amos), Madame Robinson (Sister Lucy), Lillian Johnson (Sister Ca'line), Tom Fletcher

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