

1 The Negro Actor and the American Movies

[1929]

The Negro actor and the part he has played in the development of the American movie is one of the most interesting phases of what is now one of America's greatest industries. Because no true picture of American life can be drawn without the Negro, his advent into the movies was inevitable; but also because of the prejudices that have hampered and retarded him since his coming to America, his debut was delayed. To be perfectly frank, the Negro entered the movies through a back door, labelled "servants' entrance." However, beggars cannot be choosers, and it is to his credit that he accepted the parts assigned to him, made good, and opened the door for bigger things.

In order better to appreciate the attitude of the white producer toward Negro talent, we must keep in mind the change in the social status of the group. To put it briefly, at the time of the Civil War, the Northern white man considered the Negro a black angel without wings, about whom he must busy himself in spirit and deed. On the other hand, the Southern white man detested Negroes in general and liked his particular blacks. After the Negro had been given his freedom, there soon arose the feeling that he was an economic and social menace and we find him depicted everywhere as a rapist. Then the white dilettante, exhausted with trying to find new thrills, stumbled over the Negro and exclaimed, "See what we have overlooked! These beloved vagabonds! Our own Negroes, right here at home!" And voila! Black became the fad.

From: Black
Films and
Film-makers,
by Lindsay
Patterson (ed).
Dodd, Mead & Co.
NY, 1973

These types of thinking have influenced the development of the Negro as part of the moving picture game. Within the remembrance of all of us, and still in some pictures and stage productions, we find whites blacked up for indifferent imitations of their dark brothers. But more and more is the practice falling into disrepute. The old cry that Negroes with ability cannot be found has not held water. In fact, it has been conclusively proven that under the proper director, the Negro turns out some of the best acting on the American screen and stage. A people of many emotions, with an inherent sense of humor and a love for play, they do not find it difficult to express themselves in action, or to bring to that expression the genuineness and enjoyment they feel. Nevertheless, excuse after excuse has been made to keep the Negro off the silver sheet, and it was the servants of white stars, who as individuals first got the breaks.

For example, Oscar Smith, who came to the Paramount Studios nine years ago [1920] as the personal servant of Wallace Reid, and at present owns the boothblack stand at the studio, has worked in two hundred pictures and has recently received a contract exclusively for Paramount talking pictures. Stepin Fetchit, who is billed as the star in the William Fox all-talkie *Hearts in Dixie* was the porter on the Fox lots. Carolyn Snowden, who played opposite Fetchit in *In Old Kentucky* was also a lady's maid for a prominent star. And so it went. Another point is also true. They worked in the early days in character. By that I mean, often the star's maid went on as her maid, provided she could be made to look homely and black enough. And all Negroes, perhaps with one or two exceptions, were cast as menials and as comedy characters.

As for the exceptions, they were for the most part African chiefs and the members of their tribes. One, however, I do recall from my first experiences with movies. He is Noble Johnson, of whom practically nothing is heard now in connection with Negroes. The last time I saw him, he was playing the part of a Mexican bandit, and rumor has it that he owns considerable stock in the company for which he works and is used for all parts calling for a swarthy skin. The other two unusual individuals are Sunshine Sammy and Farina, the two juvenile favorites of the Hal Roach-*Our Gang* comedies.

Negroes in any great numbers were first used for atmosphere—for mobs, levee and plantation, native African jungle, and popular black-belt cabaret scenes. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, which, by the way, employed the old rape idea, and for that reason was so distasteful to Negroes, is an excellent example of the Negro as atmosphere. *West of Zanzibar*, a popular Lon Chaney film, and the *Stanley in Africa* pictures used large groups of Negroes for the jungle scenes.

The next move on the part of producers was evident. Isolated Negro characters and Negroes as atmosphere were combined for the Universal feature production, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with James B. Lowe as Uncle Tom. Not all Negro parts, however, even in this picture, were assigned to Negroes. Topsy, Liza, her husband, and baby were played by whites, but up to the introduction of the "talkies," *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the outstanding accomplishment of the Negro in the movie world.

It is significant that with the coming of talkies, the first all-Negro feature pictures were attempted by the big companies. White America has always made much of the fact that all Negroes can sing and dance. Moreover, it is supposed to get particular pleasure out of the Negro's dialect, his queer colloquialisms, and his quaint humor. The movie of yesterday, to be sure, let him dance, but his greatest charm was lost by silence. With the talkie, the Negro is at his best. Now he can be heard in song and speech. And no one who has seen the William Fox *Hearts in Dixie*, featuring Stepin Fetchit, Clarence Muse, and Eugene Jackson, or Al Christie's *Melancholy Dame*, an Octavius Roy Cohen all-talking comedy with Evelyn Preer, Eddie Thompson, and Spencer Williams, will disagree with the fact that the Negro's voice can be a thing of beauty in spite of the mechanics of this new venture in the art of the movies.

Of these two Negro all-talkies, *Hearts in Dixie* is by far the most pretentious. The story, as such, is nil. Here indeed, we have the "beloved vagabond." It does embody the idea, however, that some Negroes are not superstitious and are anxious to better themselves, and is a rather entertaining picture of plantation life; but it lacks substance. You were ever conscious of the fact that the producers were not interested in the plot, but rather in the talking and sing-

ing sequences. The ensemble singing and the voice of Clarence Muse were decided contributions and well worth the price of admission. *The Melancholy Dame*, a short comedy with little music or dancing, depends principally upon its comic dialogue, which is given in the best Octavius Roy Cohen dialect, for its interest. Incidentally, Mr. Cohen himself directed the picture.

Of course, it is generally believed that the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production, *Hallelujah*, will be the ace of the all-Negro talking pictures. King Vidor is directing. Daniel Haynes, formerly of *Show Boat*, has the principal role and is supported by Nina May McKenney of the Blackbirds of 1929; Victoria Spivey, a blues recording artist; Fannie DeKnight, who played in *Lula Belle*; Langdon Grey, a non-professional, and 375 extras. There are forty singing sequences, including folk songs, spirituals, work songs, and blues. Eva Jessye, a Negro, who has compiled a book of spirituals and trained the original "Dixie Jubilee Choir," is directing the music. The story, which is devoid of propaganda, is that of a country boy who temporarily succumbs to the wiles of a woman, is beset with tragedy, and ultimately finds peace. It is a known fact that several studios are holding up all-Negro productions until the fate of *Hallelujah* has been pronounced.

In the meantime, *Show Boat*, a talkie using the present American *Show Boat* company of both blacks and whites, has been made by Universal and had its première at Miami and Palm Beach, March 17; Ethel Waters, greatest comedienne of her race, and Mamie Smith, blues singer of note, have been signed up by Warner Brothers for Vitaphone comedies; Sissle and Blake, internationally famous kings of syncopation, have been released by Warner Brothers; Christie Studio is preparing another Negro film; Eric Von Stroheim is working on the Negro sequence of *The Swamp*, and John Ford's *Strong Boy* is using a large number of Negroes.

Three by-products have resulted from this slow recognition of the Negro as movie material—Negro film corporations, Negro and white film corporations, and white corporations, all for the production of Negro pictures. They have the same motives; namely, to present Negro films about and for Negroes, showing them not

as fools and servants, but as human beings with the same emotions, desires, and weaknesses as other people's; and to share in the profits of this great industry. Of this group, perhaps the three best known companies are The Micheaux Pictures Company of New York City, an all-colored concern whose latest releases are *The Wages of Sin* and *The Broken Violin*; The Colored Players Film Corporation of Philadelphia, a white concern, which produced three favorites—*A Prince of His People*, *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, starring Charles Gilpin, and *Children of Fate*; and The Liberty Photography, Inc., of Boston, a mixed company, no picture of which I have seen. There is rumor of the formation in New York City of The Tono-Film, an all-Negro corporation, for exclusive Negro talking pictures, and that its officers and directors will include Paul Robeson, Noble Sissle, Maceo Pinkard, Earl and Maurice Dancer, J. C. Johnson, F. E. Miller, and Will Vodery, all of whom are known in America and abroad. So far, the pictures released by this group have been second rate in subject matter, direction, and photography, but they do keep before the public the great possibilities of the Negro in movies.

In conclusion, it must be conceded by the most skeptical that the Negro has at last become an integral part of the motion picture industry. And his benefits will be more than monetary. Because of the Negro movie, many a prejudiced white who would not accept a Negro unless as a servant, will be compelled to admit that at least he can be something else; many an indifferent white will be beguiled into a positive attitude of friendliness; many a Negro will have his race consciousness and self-respect stimulated. In short, the Negro movie actor is a means of getting acquainted with Negroes and under proper direction and sympathetic treatment can easily become a potent factor in our great struggle for better race relations. And the talkie, which is being despised in certain artistic circles, is giving him the great opportunity to prove his right to a place on the screen.

Floyd C. Covington

2 The Negro Invades Hollywood

[1929]

What part, if any, does the Negro play in the motion picture industry of California? Behind the walls of the legion studios that festoon the Hollywood district, what place has the Negro taken in the cinematographic world? These questions are, no doubt, in the minds of the casual observers who live outside the environs of "Filmland."

When one attempts to catalogue the information that might answer these questions, one is apt to find enthusiasm more abundant than figures. However, it is apparent from observation and available statistics that Negroes have been employed in the motion picture industry in various capacities for a period of years. The major portion of these have been (and are) employed as "extras" to create atmosphere in jungle, South Sea Island, and African scenes as natives, warriors, and the like. In scenes requiring domestic of color the Negro is employed to do these "bits." Others are employed to do individual roles or "parts" such as mammy types and other character sketches that receive camera close-ups and remain prominent throughout the picture. Many within this latter group are exceptionally talented, and their names are included with the other principals in the respective pictures.

In previous years the custom has been for each studio to operate its own casting office and hire those who applied at its gates for employment. In January 1926 the fourteen leading picture corpo-

rations of California, namely, Metropolitan, United Artists, Hal Roach, Christie, F. B. O., Mack Sennett, Educational, Universal, Pathe, Warner Bros., William Fox, First National, Paramount, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer organized the Central Casting Corporation at Hollywood. This agency acts as a clearing house for "extras" of all types for the fourteen named studios. Approximately eleven thousand adult applicants are registered according to type at the Central Casting and are available for immediate call from any of the studios.

The Casting Agency has among its personnel a Negro casting director who is one of the salaried employees of the company. The director, Mr. Chas. E. Butler,¹ has been with the organization for about two years. He has been engaged in casting work for more than five years and was formerly with the Cinema-Auxiliary. Mr. Butler is responsible for the collecting, classifying, and distributing of the Negro "extras." His job is not an easy one. During the staging of the all-Negro talking picture *Hallelujah* he was responsible for more than 340 "extras" to report at the studio one Sunday morning. The particular scene—a camp meeting service—required types who could both sing and act. Interestingly enough, the church choirs of the city were practically empty for the day.

Those individuals who do "parts" are employed usually under contract by the individual studios. The records of these employees are not kept by the Central Casting but by the casting offices of the various companies. It is very difficult to get definite figures concerning this group, as the offices are reluctant to give any information concerning salaries or length of contracts. Each company may have on its list various Negro types that are used in its pictures. On the other hand, these types are interchangeable. When a picture con-

¹In an article, "Your Future in Hollywood" (*Our World*, 1946), Carlton Moss declares that during World War II black talent was in short demand and hardly any was used in war stories despite the fact that there were a million Negro servicemen and servicewomen in our armed forces, and millions in the war industries. He quotes Charles Butler as saying that "... you don't need maids and porters when you're making mostly war pictures." Butler further states: "At present there are 78 Negro men and 67 Negro women on the rolls, a total of 145 against the 300 that were carried before the war." Carlton also reports actor-agent Ben Carter as saying that "during the last two years there have been no calls for any of the 100 Negro singers or 60 dancers."