The Emperor Jones (1933 film)

The Emperor Jones is a 1933 American pre-Code film adaptation of the Eugene O'Neill play of the same title, was made outside of the Hollywood studio system, financed with private money from neophyte wealthy producers, and directed by iconoclast Dudley Murphy, who had sought O'Neill's permission to film the play since its 1924 production in New York. He cast Paul Robeson, Dudley Digges, Frank H. Wilson, and Fredi Washington. The screenplay was written by DuBose Heyward and filmed at Kaufman Astoria Studios with the beach scene shot at Jones Beach Long Beach, New York. Robeson starred in the O'Neill play on stage, both in the United States and England, a role that had helped launch his career.

Contents

Background
Plot
Cast
Production
Reception
Awards
DVD release
References
Sources
External links

Background

The film is based rather loosely on O'Neil's play, but adds an entire backstory before O'Neill's actual play begins, and includes several new characters that do not appear in it (such as Jones' girlfriend, and a friendly priest who advises him to give up his evil ways). The film does provide what may be Robeson's greatest dramatic performance in a movie.

In the film version, the opening shots are of an African ritual dance. Some critics are quick to assess the opening as representative of the "primitive" black world to which Brutus Jones will eventually revert. However, more scholarly reviews of the film understand the complexities of the allusion to and comparison between the roots of the African-American church

The Emperor Jones

Theatrical release poster

Directed by	Dudley Murphy
Produced by	Gifford Cochran John Krimsky
Written by	Eugene O'Neill (play) DuBose Heyward (screenplay)
Starring	Paul Robeson Dudley Digges Frank H. Wilson Fredi Washington Ruby Elzy
Music by	Rosamond Johnson Frank Tours
Cinematography	Ernest Haller
Edited by	Grant Whytock
Distributed by	United Artists
Release date	September 29, 1933
Running time	72 minutes 76 minutes

	(restored) 80 minutes (original)
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	$263,000[1]

and the rhythmic chanting often seen in African religious practices. As discussed further, below, its director, Dudley Murphy, had co-directed Ballet Mecanique and other musically-based experimental films. Having just spent several years in Hollywood, he now craved the freedom to use musical forms as a way of translating O'Neill's experimentation on stage into a film form. Paul Robeson was already a musical star and would go on to study traditional African music and dance while on location in Nigeria and with scholars in London.

A quick dissolve takes us into a Baptist church in the American South, where the dancing of the congregation presents an image that argues for a continuity between the "savage" Africans and the ring-shout Baptists. Such suggestive editing may be the kind of element that causes viewers to suspect the film of racism.

0:00

The Emperor Jones

Similarly, the film makes copious use of the word "nigger", as did O'Neill's original play. African Americans criticized O'Neill's language at the time, so its preservation and expansion in the film present another cause for critique. In fact, in the original production in 1920, the actor playing Jones, Charles Sidney Gilpin, a leading man in the all-African American Lafayette players, objected to the use of the word "nigger" to playwright Eugene O'Neill and began substituting "Negro" in the Provincetown Players premiere. He continued to do so when the show went on tour for two years in the States. In this, he reflected the African-American community's problematic relationship with the play.

O'Neill, an ex-sailor who freely used offensive epithets, had based the character, down to some specific traits and use of language, on an African-American friend from the New England waterfront,[2] and felt the use of the word was dramatically justified. They could not come to a reconciliation and O'Neill gave the part to the much younger and then-unknown Paul Robeson for the 1924 New York revival and then its London premiere, both of which launched Robeson as the first black leading man of heretofore white American and British theater. Given Robeson's subsequent career as a Civil Rights activist, his character using the term so frequently in regard to other blacks seems shocking today, but Robeson would not have had his impact on civil rights had he never played this role. It made him a star, in a way that virtually no other part in the 1920s and '30s could have done; with its powerful visions of a slave ship and being sold at auction, the role of Brutus Jones had a scope and a reality that no American play had had for a black man before. Robeson often struggled with the inherent racist and imperialist limits of what few leading man roles there were for a black actor then and ran into criticism at the time because of it (see *Sanders of the River*, a 1935 film set in Nigeria).

Plot

At a Baptist prayer meeting, the preacher leads a prayer for Brutus Jones, who has just been hired as a Pullman Porter, a job that served the upward mobility of thousands of African-American men in the first half of the 20th century. Jones proudly shows off his uniform to his girlfriend Dolly (and the film's audience, setting up the contrast with the later scenes in which "the Emperor Jones" parades around in overdone military garb) before joining the congregation for a spiritual. But Jones is quickly corrupted by the lures of

the big city, taking up with fast women and gamblers. One boisterous crap game leads to a fight in which he inadvertently stabs Jeff, the man who had introduced him to the fast-life and from whom he had stolen the affections of the beautiful Undine (played by Fredi Washington).

Jones was imprisoned and sent to do hard labor. (A stint on the chain gang allows the film its first opportunity to show Robeson without his shirt on, an exposure of male nudity unusual for 1933 and certainly for a black actor. Here and later the director plays on Robeson's sexual power and, implicitly, on cultural stereotypes about the libidinal power of black men.) Jones escapes the convict's life after striking a white guard who was torturing and beating another prisoner. Making his way home, he briefly receives the assistance of his girlfriend Dolly before taking a job stoking coal on a steamer headed for the Caribbean. One day, he catches sight of a remote island and jumps ship, swimming to the island.

The island is under the crude rule of a top-hatted black despot who receives merchandise from Smithers, the dilapidated white colonial merchant who is the sole Caucasian on the island. Jones rises to become Smithers' partner and eventually "Emperor". He dethrones his predecessor with a trick that allows him to survive what appears to be a fusillade of bullets, creating the myth that he can only be slain by a silver one. Jones's rule of the island involves increasing taxes on the poor natives and pocketing the proceeds.

The highlight is a twelve-minute spoken monologue taken directly from O'Neill's play, in which Brutus Jones (Robeson), hunted by natives in revolt, flees through the jungle and slowly disintegrates psychologically, becoming a shrieking hysteric who runs right into the path of his pursuers. This section was written as a nearly autobiographical account by O'Neill, who had gone off to Honduras the year after his graduation from Princeton and gotten hopelessly lost in the jungle, resulting in hallucinatory fears.

Cast

- Paul Robeson – Brutus Jones
- Dudley Digges – Smithers
- Frank H. Wilson – Jeff
- Fredi Washington – Undine
- Ruby Elzy – Dolly
- George Haymid Stamper – Lem
- Jackie "Moms" Mabley – Marcella
- Blueboy O'Connor – Treasurer
- Brandon Evans – Carrington
- Rex Ingram – Court Crier

Production

The film had originally meant to have ten days of location shooting in Haiti, but budget restrictions required shooting the film in the Astoria studios, underutilized due to the abandonment of the industry for the West Coast. Murphy was restricted to a trip to Haiti to bring back extras, musicians and dancers. As a newly self-imposed exile of the Hollywood studio system, Murphy had insisted on New York as opposed to Los Angeles; an early advocate of an independent New York-based cinema, free of Hollywood control. As the co-director of Ballet Mecanique - though Fernand Leger would become far more famous for this experimental, non-narrative film - Murphy had explored avant-garde film from its earliest days in Paris, and he wanted creative freedom the New York symbolized to him. He also prized access to the New York-based African-American community's highly trained theatrical talent. Robeson had only one location requirement: no filming south of the Mason–Dixon line—that is, in the then Jim Crow, segregated southern states of the former Confederacy.

The producers, director and screenwriter were required to present the screenplay to Eugene O'Neill before filming could commence; fearful because they'd added quite a bit of material, by making new scenes from what on stage were entirely in monologue, they were delighted to find O'Neill gave the screenplay his blessing, saying they'd "written a fine three-act play."[3] O'Neill received $30,000 for the rights, a not insubstantial sum in the height of the Depression, which he badly needed for an expensive summer home he'd just purchased. Paul Robeson got $5000 a week, comparable to star prices out in Hollywood. The budget was roughly $200,000.

Dudley Murphy and screenwriter DuBose Heyward had both been experimenting in using imagery that is held together by the film's music, rather than dialogue or narrative. In the case of *The Emperor Jones*, the director was trying to do both, not always successfully. Robeson would later complain that Murphy was condescending to him, that he was rushed through important scenes. Murphy was, in truth, far more interested in camera angles and visual experiments than in acting. He had no theater background to speak of, and further reports surfaced that he was completely out of his element in Robeson's crucial jungle scenes—the only parts of the film that actually used O'Neill's hallucinatory dialogue—and William de Mille (Cecil B. DeMille's older brother) had to be brought in to complete them - something DeMille himself claimed but was disputed by others.

Emperor Jones also suffered at the hands of the Hays Office, whose Production Code was in place and had been since 1930, if only haphazardly enforced until the arrival of censor Joseph Breen the following year. (The use of the term "pre-code" for films made during and before 1934 is actually a misnomer; it refers to Breen's ascendancy, not to the absence of a code.)

Black on white violence was strictly forbidden, so a scene in which Jones kills a sadistic white prison guard had to be cut, leaving a lurch in the action. Haitian women smoking were cut; a white trader lighting a cigarette for the Emperor was cut. A steamy scene between Robeson and Fredi Washington as a prostitute had to be reshot when the Hays Office decreed she was too light-skinned and might be mistaken for a white woman; the actress had to wear dark make-up when the scene filmed a second time (the following year, Fredi Washington, a lifelong civil rights activist, would star in the original *Imitation of Life* (1934), playing an African-American girl passing for white). Worst of all, the hallucinations in the jungle of the slave ship and the auction were removed, undercutting the film's "dramatic resonance and doing a serious injustice to Eugene O'Neill's play," as Murphy's biographer wrote in 2005.[4]

Reception

The film was a box office disappointment for United Artists.[5]

The black-and-white film had blue tinting for the jungle scenes, something Murphy went to considerable trouble in this era before color - but it was considered old-fashioned, a throw-back to the silent era, and disappeared from most prints.

In 2002, the Library of Congress restored *The Emperor Jones* using archive footage. This version was able to restore the cut scenes of black-on-white violence, in addition to several minor changes. Unfortunately, no existing film of the two cut dream sequences was found, and thus this edition remains incomplete.[6]

Awards

In 1999, the film was deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the United States Library of Congress, and selected for preservation in the National Film Registry. - thus setting the stage for its restoration.

DVD release

The film is in the public domain[7] now, and can be purchased at many online outlets. A newly remastered version (with commentary and extras) was released on DVD by The Criterion Collection in 2006.

References

1. "THE LASKY PRODUCTIONS" (http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article37837916). *Western Mail (Perth, WA : 1885-1954)*. Perth, WA: National Library of Australia. November 2, 1933. p. 32. Retrieved August 5, 2012.
2. Arthur R. and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill - Life with Monte Cristo*, NY, (2000) p. 349-50.
3. Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy, Hollywood Wild Card* (2005), Kindle edition, p. 1835.
4. Delson, *Dudley Murphy* (2005), Kindle edition, p. 2003.
5. By, D. W. (1934, Nov 25). TAKING A LOOK AT THE RECORD. New York Times (1923-Current File) Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/docview/101193306
6. Hornaday, Ann (31 August 2002). "Worthy or Not, 'The Emperor' Is Restored" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2002/08/31/worthy-or-not-the-emperor-is-restored/dac09161-ac91-4cfe-a2f3-5c7e0e85c80f/?noredirect=on). Retrieved 30 January 2019.
7. Slide, Anthony (2013). *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (https://books.google.com/?id=DRJ-QctqaLcC&pg=PT123&dq=the+emperor+jones+1933+public+domain#v=onepage&q=the%20emperor%20jones%201933%20public%20domain&f=false). McFarland. ISBN 9781476604572.

Sources

- Mordaunt Hall (September 20, 1933). "Emperor Jones (1933): Paul Robeson in the Pictorial Conception of Eugene O'Neill's Play, *The Emperor Jones*" (https://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?_r=1&res=9B05E4D61430EF3ABC4851DFBF668388629EDE). *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 16, 2009.

External links

- *The Emperor Jones* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023985/) on IMDb
- *The Emperor Jones (https://archive.org/details/TheEmperorJonesVideoAudioUpgrade)* is available for free download at the Internet Archive
- *The Emperor Jones* (https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v15741) at AllMovie
- *Master of Disguise: Paul Robeson and The Emperor Jones* (https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1269-master-of-disguise-paul-robeson-and-the-emperor-jones) an essay by Hilton Als at the Criterion Collection