



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

Black Actors in American Cinema

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Students of acting at The Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School have very little knowledge of individual actors and their contribution to the American cinema. This is especially true of black actors. Since these acting classes are multi-racial, the students will respond to information about the struggle and accomplishments of black film actors.

The objective of my curriculum unit is to address this concern. We will seek to understand how race and its representation influenced the careers and opportunities of black actors. (In this curriculum unit I will use the term actor for both male and female performers.) We will study the work of individual actors. In the process of studying the black actor's contribution to American cinema from the era of silent film to the present, we will also be studying race and representation in Hollywood films.

Film is one of the most influential means of communication and a powerful medium of propaganda. Race and representation is central to the study of the black film actor, since the major studios reflected and reinforced the racism of their times. The depiction of blacks in Hollywood movies reinforced many of the prejudices of the white majority rather than objective reality, limiting black actors to stereotypical roles.

My strategy for studying black actors in American cinema consists of viewing films and segments of films in order to acquaint students with the work of individual actors. We will accompany these viewings with biographies of the actors, information concerning the films, specific acting exercises on each film, and other relevant information to make up lesson plans. This material will stimulate discussion among the students and lead to performance and reenactment of key scenes from the films. Since there are a great many wonderful black film actors, selection of the actors for this unit has been especially difficult. I tried to follow a historical perspective and select actors from each decade, starting with *WITHIN OUR GATES* (1919). In some instances I selected films to make comparisons between acting styles of various actors. I also selected some films that were originally plays.

Special emphasis will be placed on the analysis of stereotyping as it applied to blacks in film. Stereotypes are simplified and conscriptive images of a group. In the history of race relations stereotypes have been used to demean or control others. Stereotyping the African slave in the United States began early. It was used to keep the black man and woman in a certain place in the social structure.

The two most perpetuated images of the slave were that of the "savage" and "child." The "savage" was brutal, cannibalistic, ruthless, violent, and lustful. The image of the child was more subtle. Laws were set in

place to protect whites against the African's "barbaric" ways. In the concept of the child there were no laws except that of excluding blacks from the educational process. The concept of the child was developed orally and became part of white folklore. In this stereotype the black person was simpleminded, happy, slow-witted, easily terrified, playful, and dependent, which justified a white attitude of paternalism.

A complex black-white, adult-child, racist relationship was institutionalized into the popular culture. Slaves had to sing and dance for their masters. They had to perform to display their supposed happiness and contentment with their position. They were rewarded when they displayed happy, sunny dispositions and grins, and indulged in laughable pranks and capers. This idea of blacks formed the basis for the first indigenous American theater, the minstrel show.

From the 1840s to 1950s the minstrel show was the popular stage form. It is based on the supposed humor, song, dance, and demeanor of the plantation slave and the urban black dandy.

"White men in blackface appeared throughout the entire country, in cities and towns, on riverbanks and in saloons. Hundreds of professional troupes and thousands of amateur groups performed minstrel plays. School-children, church members, Boy and Girl Scout troops fraternal clubs, hospital groups, and many others applied burnt cork, mispronounced words and phrases, sang "black songs," imitated "black culture," danced "black numbers," and generally acted the buffoon." (1)

The focus of the minstrel was the inept but comical end man. An end man was the performer at either end of the chorus line in a minstrel show who played the bones or tambourine and bantered with the interlocutor.

Examining the stereotype of blacks is essential to our work on this unit. Our class will examine the image of blacks in cartoons, comic strips, advertisements, food cartons, books, and magazines, and the image of blacks in ludicrous situations in film. We will note the usual single names of these characters (who bear no resemblance to any real person, living or dead): Uncle, Mammy, Rochester, Sambo, Rastus, Sam, Boy.

Sigmund Lubin produced the SAMBO series of all-black comedies. These films, produced between 1909 and 1911, were so successful that Lubin created a second similar series, the RASTUS films. Both series were filled with slapstick and the antics of a comic black man who "knows his place" and gets beaten up by laughing whites. At this time in the early 1900s, Hollywood took no stand on any social reform as far as blacks were concerned. In fact, with few exceptions, black characters were played by whites in almost all Hollywood films until after the First World War.

The following films may be viewed either in whole or in part to study stereotyping of black actors in film.

His Trust (1911)

His Trust Fulfilled (1911)

The Birth of a Nation (1915)

The Little Colonel (1935)

The Littlest Rebel (1935)

20th Century (1934)

Jezebel (1938)

We will be studying Paul Robeson in this curriculum unit. We will see THE EMPEROR JONES, discuss the performances, and select scenes to reenact. Eugene O'Neill's text of the play will be compared to the film. As students studying the actor's art, we will note what is most impressive about Robeson's films: that is Paul Robeson himself. Physically Robeson was such a towering figure that he immediately suggested strength. It would be difficult for him to ever be perceived as a weak character. Looking at his performances moment by moment we will see the great joy of the actor, especially when he sings. The actor with his gleaming eyes, his ironic smile, his great bulk . . . will lead us into discussions of one of the tenets of method acting . . . "drawing on the self."

Nina May McKinney was billed as "the screen's first black love goddess." MGM's 1929 film HALLELUJAH was billed as the "ace of all-black pictures" and it was directed by one of the studio's top directors, King Vidor. There were more than forty singing and dancing sequences in the film, including folk songs, spirituals, work songs, and blues. The film had a strong plot, but unfortunately the message was . . . blacks should know and stay in their place. McKinney plays "Chick," a cabaret dancer who is led away from her night life by the male lead, played by Daniel Haynes. He becomes a preacher, and in a full-scale revival meeting at a river he baptizes McKinney and leads her to religion. The story progresses along melodramatic lines. This film and McKinney will be part of our study.

Comparing Hattie McDaniels' and Ethel Waters' films will be part of our studies. The class will read excerpts of Waters' autobiography, *His Eye is on the Sparrow*. The story of her struggle up from a desperately poor childhood to the heights of Broadway success is a story of great courage. We will view at least two of her movies; PINKY, and THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING. One class project will be to view the film THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING, and then read and perform scenes from the play by Carson McCullers on which the movie is based.

Dorothy Dandridge, along with Lena Horne, has been called the "exotic, doomed mulatto." A brilliant actor and "star", she spend her career having to play what was at heart the old, classic type . . . the tragic mulatto. CARMEN JONES was the 1950's most lavish, most publicized, and most successful all black spectacle. Produced by Otto Preminger and released in 1954 it was based on Bizet's opera CARMEN. The movie transforms the Spanish cigarette girl into Carmen Jones, a sexy black factory worker in the South. Audiences flocked to see the movie and it made Dandridge a star. Her performance earned her an Oscar nomination as best actress of the year. No black performer had ever before been nominated for a leading actor award. Hattie McDaniel had won a best supporting actress award for GONE WITH THE WIND. Ethel Waters was nominated for best supporting actress. We will also look at the relationship in styles between Nina Mae McKinney, Dorothy Dandridge, and Lena Horne.

Ivan Dixon and the film NOTHING BUT A MAN will be included in our lesson plans. This movie was written and directed by Michael Roemer. The subject of the film is racism viewed from a Southern black perspective. Ivan Dixon (who later played the token black in the TV series HOGAN'S HEROES), has the lead role of Duff. Abbey Lincoln plays the sheltered, school-teacher daughter of a small town Alabama minister. This is her first screen appearance. This is also one of the first films of Gloria Foster and Yophet Kotta.

To conclude and bring us to the present, I will include Sidney Poitier in A RAISIN IN THE SUN, Denzel Washington in MALCOLM X, and Laurence Fishburn in OTHELLO. These three films will be studied in combination with play scripts.

PAUL ROBESON / THE EMPEROR JONES

The production of THE EMPEROR JONES was a notable event on Broadway in 1920 and 1921. The success of THE EMPEROR JONES, along with ANNA CHRISTIE and THE HAIRY APE, was a triumph and a vindication of a cultural movement of which Eugene O'Neill was an integral part. He was involved with a movement of cultural protest, of protest against the business-centered civilization of America, against philistinism, puritanism and vulgarity. Art was to become truer, fresher, and unconventional. It was to be used as a weapon against the dominant and inadequate culture of the time.

This play deals with the misery of man, not in a social sense but in a metaphysical one. The central character is one of the insulted and injured, a black man. O'Neill does not dwell on the social forces which have insulted and injured him. For O'Neill, the social insult and injury are not so much facts in themselves as symbols of man's cosmic situation.

The "emperor," Brutus Jones, does not typify the African American, even though we see him reliving the experience of his oppression. He typifies all men, with their raw ignorance and hysterical fear hidden under layers of intellect. Like Oedipus, Jones is inordinately proud of his mind; he brags of the craft by which he was able to win control of the West Indian nation which he rules, and he brags of the courage which his rationalism gives him. But whether or not by the author's design, he is called BRUTUS Jones; this little Caesar contains within himself his own assassin whose gradual ascendancy makes up the plot. Confronted with loneliness and dread, the emperor begins to slay himself; the sovereign reason begins to give way. Jones's craft, his rationalism, and his self-assurance peel from him like the layers of an onion; he goes backward through social fears to very fear itself, the fear of the universe which lies in primitive religion. The throb of the tomtom pursues him through the fear-infested jungle, as Fate pursues Oedipus. If we consider THE EMPEROR JONES as a kind of philosophic masque it comes to much the same conclusion that Sophocles reached: The rational intellect of man is not able to cope with the inscrutable ways of life.

THE EMPEROR JONES by Eugene O'Neill

Cast of Characters:

Brutus Jones . . . Emperor

Henry Smithers . . . A Cockney Trader

An old Native Woman

Lem . . . A Native Chief

Soldiers . . . Adherents of Lem

Jeff; the Little Formless Fears; the Negro Convicts; the prison Guard; the Planter; the Auctioneer; the Slaves; the Congo Witch-Doctor; the Crocodile God.

The action of the play takes place on an island in the West Indies that is as yet not self-determined by white Marines. The form of native government is, for the time being, an empire.

On May 6, 1924, THE EMPEROR JONES opened with Paul Robeson in the title role. The role of Brutus Jones, an

ex-Pullman porter who has set himself over the inhabitants of a West Indian island, is a theatrical tour de force. He is the focus of the action for five scenes as his subjects revolt against his tyranny and corruption, and he attempts to escape through the jungle. There the maddening sounds of drums and his own buried ghosts hound him until he is captured and killed.

His performance was a great success and received rave notices. Alexander Woolcott thought he was "brilliant;" the *Herald-Tribune* review said that Robeson's portrayal of Brutus Jones was "as strong in its own right" as the performance of Charles Gilpin who originated the role. *The New York Telegram and Evening Mail* described the audience's reaction to the young actor: "Robeson was dragged before the curtain by men and women who rose to their feet and applauded. When the ache in their arms stopped their hands, they used their voices, shouted meaningless words, gave hoarse throaty cries . . . the ovation was for Robeson, for his emotional strength, for his super acting."

The Negro press was more reserved about the drama. They did think that Robeson possessed the qualities that could make him transcend race as an actor. "Oh!" said the *Pittsburg Courier* , "What a Brutus or Anthony he would make."(2)

In 1933 Robeson would finally play in film the role of Brutus Jones that he had made famous on the stage. DuBose Heyward was commissioned to adapt the script, Dudley Murphy was named as director, and J. R. Johnson was engaged as musical director. Heyward actually wrote almost an entire new play, in which Jones's arrival in Haiti is preceded by events only alluded to in the original play.

THE EMPEROR JONES was filmed twenty minutes from 42nd Street and Broadway at the old Paramount Studios in Astoria, Long Island. Most of the shots were staged inside. One location was prohibited; Robeson's contract stipulated that he would not have to go south.

The film opened in September 1933 at the Rivoli Theater downtown and at the Roosevelt Theater in Harlem, where during the first week of its run, blacks lined up and bought tickets that amounted to \$10,000. Black heroes were rare in the movies, and when Jones snarled, "Maybe I killed one man in the States and maybe I'll kill another right now," the Harlem audience roared.

Critical response to the film was divided, although Robeson's acting was highly praised. The black press, at first favorable, found upon reflection that the film was far from perfect because it perpetuated a stereotype. Some felt the film reinforced society's false image of blacks and that blacks could not afford to take a detached view of their art. Three years later, a conference of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association held in Canada would condemn THE EMPEROR JONES as part of "an international conspiracy to disparage and crush the aspirations of Negroes toward higher culture and civilization and to impress upon them their inferiority."

Although Robeson would later come to regret the film, he saw it at first chiefly as a work of art. He made films in England and in Hollywood and in 1939 he virtually retired from films.

"I thought I could do something for the Negro race in films, show the truth about them and other people, too. I used to do my part and go away feeling satisfied, thought everything was O.K. Well it wasn't. The industry was not prepared to permit me to portray the life or express the living interests, hopes and aspirations of the struggling people from whom I come. You bet they will never let me play a part in a film in which a Negro is on top." (3)

Paul Robeson was a legendary figure of his time. He had brilliant intellect and authentic athletic ability. The son of a former slave, he was born in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1889. In high school he was an honor student, and he won a scholarship to Rutgers University at a time when there were no blacks there. He had astonishing athletic ability. A four-letter man, he was on the All-American football team in 1918. At the time he was called the greatest defensive end ever. He also had a great academic record. He was an honor student, a 12-letter athlete, a football All-American in 1917, and an award winner in oratory. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, graduated with honors, and went on to earn his LL.B. at Columbia University Law School. Performing on stage in THE EMPEROR JONES earned him critical praise as an actor and singer. There is a point in the play where the actor playing Jones is called upon to whistle, and he sang instead; this was to bring him a new career as a singer.

Plagued by racism, Robeson escaped to Europe where he spent much of his time acting on stage and in films. Robeson triumphed in London in his first OTHELLO. He had strong political beliefs. In the 1930s he made several trips to Russia. He spoke out against the Nazis. He entertained anti-Franco, anti-Fascist Loyalist troops during the Spanish Civil War. He also supported the Committee to Aid China, and he became chairman of the Council on African Affairs.

In the 1940s Robeson played OTHELLO on Broadway to great acclaim. After World War II, he campaigned for the rights of African Americans and it was at this time that Robeson was denied a passport and barred from concert halls. This was the time of the anti-Communist movement and the McCarthy hearings. In 1958 his passport was reissued and he went abroad to give concerts and appear on stage.

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / EMPEROR JONES

MATERIALS

- Video of film EMPEROR JONES;
- Text of the play;
- Books on Robeson's life that contain photographs of the actor as the characters he has played;
- Music tapes of drums, e.g., Olatunja's DRUMS OF PASSION;
- Any props or costume pieces that students feel will help them develop the characters they will be interpreting.

1. Our first task after watching the film and reading the text will be to study the scenes that the filmmakers added to the movie to open up the play. Some of these scenes will be fun for us to reinterpret through improvisation. The church scenes, the scene in the bar, and the stabbing

scene especially lend themselves to group improvisation. The actors will set up the scene, decide on the characters they will play, and pick one character trait (e.g. “My character carries a bible in the church scene and is continually reading aloud from it.”; or “My character carries a purse and continually sneaks peeks of herself in her compact mirror, taking any opportunity to freshen up her make-up during the church service.”; etc.). The actors are very imaginative and will come up with interesting character behaviors.

2. This play affords us one of the best opportunities to explore sensory and place exercises. We will view scenes from the film and watch how the actors deal with the jungle and the heat. Actors will explore an imaginary jungle environment and ask questions such as: Physically, where does heat affect me? How do I walk (run) through a jungle? What vegetation is there? Is the jungle dark or full of light? Is the heat humid or dry?

3. Looking at the text we will work with the dialect in the play and discuss how to deal with it. The actors may begin work on the text by updating the dialogue, using their own words.

NINA MAE MCKINNEY / HALLELUJAH

For most of the cast of HALLELUJAH this film was the beginning and end of their screen careers. The only one to meet with “success”—and heartache—was its beautiful leading lady, Nina Mae McKinney. In the famous cabaret scene McKinney, as Chick, danced a sensuous dance which has been copied by leading ladies from Lena Horne in CABIN IN THE SKY to Lola Falana in THE LIBERATION OF L.B. JONES

McKinney, born in 1912 in Lancaster, South Carolina, moved with her family to New York and was in Lew Leslie’s famous BLACKBIRD revue when she heard of King Vidor’s auditions for HALLELUJAH. She was 17 when she won the role. Vidor brought her from a chorus spot to a starring role.

“Chick represented the black woman as an exotic sex object, half woman, half child. She was the black woman out of control of her emotions, split in two by her loyalties and her own vulnerabilities. Implied throughout the battle with self was the tragic mulatto theme. Chick was always referred to as “that cinnamon-colored gal” or “high yellor.” In this stereotypical concept the white half of her represented the spiritual; the black half, animalistic.” (4)

She was the first black actor in film to be recognized as a potential mainstream star, but her great success in HALLELUJAH led her nowhere. She was to discover that there were no leading roles for black leading ladies in Hollywood. Five years after HALLELUJAH, McKinney was forgotten in America. She appeared in Europe singing in cafes and nightclubs. In 1935, in England, she appeared opposite Paul Robeson in the film SANDERS OF THE RIVER. She did return to the screen and appeared in a number of independent all black films. Her last important role was in PINKY (1949).

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / HALLELUJAH

MATERIALS:

- Video: HALLELUJAH, CABIN IN THE SKY, STORMY WEATHER
- Books with photographs of McKinney

("Black Hollywood 1900 to 1970", and "Brown Sugar")

In this lesson plan we will also look at film clips of Lena Horn, comparing her exotic sirens to McKinney's Chick. We will look at some of her scenes from two all-black spectacles: CABIN IN THE SKY and STORMY WEATHER.

1. The baptism scene is perfect for group improvisation. The exuberance and religious fervor is palpable in this scene. Many of the actors have first hand knowledge of this type of experience and they enjoy drawing on their real life participation in church services.

ETHEL WATERS

Ethel Waters was born in abject poverty in 1900 in Chester, Pennsylvania. She moved from there when she was 17 and began her singing career in vaudeville and nightclubs billed as "Sweet Mama Stringbean". On stage she was in successful productions of AFRICANA, BLACKBIRD OF 1930, RHAPSODY IN BLACK, AS THOUSANDS CHEER, AT HOME ABROAD, MAMBA'S DAUGHTERS, and CABIN IN THE SKY. She was popular in films in the 1940s with CAIRO (1942), TALES OF MANHATTAN, CABIN IN THE SKY, STAGE DOOR CANTEEN (1943), and PINKY (1949). PINKY was one of the "message movies" of the post war period that preached against racism. As significant as her career was in the 1940s, it was her portrayal of Berenice Sadie Brown in the 1952 film version of Carson McCullers' play THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING that established her reputation. She created the role on Broadway with Julie Harris as Frankie Adams, the motherless 12 year old girl she raises, and Brandon De Wilde as John Henry, Frankie's young cousin. The film featured the same actors, but as Donald Bogle says, Ethel Waters "scored her greatest screen triumph and an overwhelming personal victory."

"THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING was more than simply a movie. It was in two very important respects a motion-picture event. Foremost, it marked the first time a black actress was used to carry a major-studio white production. Secondly, the movie was another comeback for Ethel Waters. Her autobiography, HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW, had recently been published and was a best seller. In it, she told all the lurid details of her life . . . the fights, the lovers, the marriages, the career troubles. Curiously, instead of alienating her audience, the turbulent events in the autobiography convinced patrons that Ethel Waters, who had always portrayed long-suffering

women, was indeed the characters she played. Moreover, audiences knew Ethel Waters had truly suffered. Now patrons rooted for her to succeed . . . to triumph. When THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING finally opened, audiences got just that.” (5)

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / ETHEL WATERS

MATERIALS

-Videos: A MEMBER OF THE WEDDING, PINKY, and ALICE ADAMS

-Books: Ethel Waters’ autobiography, “HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW”. Photographs of Waters from “BLACK HOLLYWOOD 1900 to 1970” and “BROWN SUGAR”

1. View both PINKY with Ethel Waters and ALICE ADAMS with Hattie McDaniel to study and compare their acting styles. Actors will choose scenes from both films to discuss and reenact. They should pay close attention to the “given circumstances” of the chosen scenes. The “given circumstances” is the information in the play set down for the actor by the playwright. They are clues as to how to make choices, how to prepare, and how to seek out obstacles. In identifying the given circumstances the actor first looks at the physical circumstances. What is the weather? How does it effect the characters and the scene? What season of the year is it? How does the character dress? How does the costume affect the physical actions of the character? Is the scene in or out doors?

2. After viewing THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING, have the female students choose one of Berenice’s monologues about Ludie Maxwell Freeman or Henry Johnson in act two. These should be chosen from the play script. This will be a “substitution” exercise. Substitution means that the actor replaces an element of the scene that the actor may not believe with something real from the actor’s own life. In the case of Ludie Maxwell Freeman, this man is the great love of Berenice’s life. On the simplest level the actors should visualize someone that the actor truly loved and lost.

DOROTHY DANDRIDGE

In 1941, Dorothy Dandridge began her movie career with a role in LADY FROM LOUISIANA. She came to the movies from a long career as a stage entertainer. Her mother was a comedienne and her father was a Cleveland minister. She performed in vaudeville with her sister Vivian. At fifteen she, her sister, and another black girl appeared as the Dandridge Sisters and toured the country in a musical performance. She was sixteen when she performed at the famous Cotton Club in Harlem. There she met Harold Nicholas of the Dancing Nicholas Brothers. They married and had one daughter.

Besides her first film, she acted in BAHAMA PASSAGE (1942), DRUMS OF THE CONGO (1942), EBONY PARADE, and THE HIT PARADE OF 1943. She got her first starring role playing a grade-school teacher in MGM's all black BRIGHT ROAD (1953). Her performance revealed a radiantly complex character. Playing the title role in CARMEN JONES (1954) made Dorothy Dandridge a star. Her nomination for an Oscar as best actress marked the first time a black performer had been nominated for a leading actor award.

"The irony that overshadowed Dorothy Dandridge's career was that although the image she marketed appeared to be contemporary and daring, at heart it was based on an old and classic type, the tragic mulatto. In her important films Dorothy Dandridge portrayed doomed, unfulfilled women. Nervous and vulnerable, they always battled with the duality of their personalities. As such, they answered the demands of their times. Dorothy Dandridge's characters brought to a dispirited nuclear age a razor-sharp sense of desperation that cut through the bleak monotony of the day. Eventually—and here lay the final irony—she may have been forced to live out a screen image that destroyed her." (6)

Sadly, after her triumph in CARMEN JONES, very few film offers came her way. Bigotry was still strong in Hollywood. The movies offered to her were variations on the exotic, self-destructive woman. In 1957 she played Margot in ISLAND IN THE SUN. She made films abroad, including THE DECKS RAN RED (1958), TAMANGO (1959), and MALAGA (1962). As we saw with Paul Robeson, Dorothy Dandridge left Hollywood, seeking chances to play more complex characters. Unfortunately, these roles never materialized, and she was disillusioned. Her last important American film role was Bess in PORGY AND BESS (1959). In 1965, at the age of 41, Dorothy Dandridge died of an overdose of anti-depression pills.

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / DOROTHY DANDRIDGE

MATERIALS

- videos: CARMEN JONES, ISLAND IN THE SUN, and PORGY AND BESS.
- books: Photographs in "BROWN SUGAR", "BLACK HOLLYWOOD 1900 to 1970"

1. Students will view CARMEN JONES and also portions of ISLAND IN THE SUN and PORGY AND BESS. Students will divide up into ensemble teams of four students. Each team will select short scenes (3 to 5 minutes) to transcribe. Each group will decide whether to act their selected scene from the transcription or to improvise that scene.
2. Each team will decide how to utilize the songs in either CARMEN JONES or PORGY AND BESS. One team may decide to speak the songs as poetry, another may decide to sing them. These musicals also give us the opportunity to work with the school's musical director. The school encourages team teaching and the musical director will give the students additional background material concerning the music.

IVAN DIXON / NOTHING BUT A MAN

NOTHING BUT A MAN, made in 1964, is one of the most vital portrayals of African Americans on film. Made by independent film-makers Robert Young and Michael Roemer, it is the story of a man and his efforts to earn a living, support his family and exist with a bit of dignity. This basic plot is complicated by the fact that the man in question, Duff Anderson, is black and will not abide by the traditionally inferior role assigned him in Alabama in 1964. Duff (Ivan Dixon) will either run away or fight back, but he will not accept inferior status. When the film opens, Duff is a footloose, carefree railroad section hand. He meets and falls in love with Josie Dawson (Abbey Lincoln), school teacher and daughter of a preacher. The generation gap between Duff and Reverend Dawson (Stanley Greene) is articulated here:

Rev: It's hard to know how to talk to the white folks these days.

Duff: Yeah, well I guess it ain't never been easy.

Rev: These are changin times. Sit down, son.

Duff: Thanks

Rev: Well, it looks like we'll be getting our new school.

Duff: How come you ain't sending them all to the same school?

Rev: Well, we've got to go easy. We haven't had any trouble in town for eight years and we're not going to have any now.

Duff: Can't live without trouble can you.

We see here two characters in conflict: a relationship of opposites. The dialogue is provocative.

Rev: Use a little psychology. Make em think you're going along and get what you want.

Duff: It ain't in me.

Rev: You can be cocky now, boy, but it won't last. You won't make it. I just feel sorry for Josie. I knew it wouldn't work out.

Duff: Well at least she ain't married to no white man's "n . . ." You been stoopin' so long, Reverend, that you don't even know how to stand up straight no more. You just half a man.

Before his marriage to Josie, Duff visits his father, Will Anderson (Julius Harris) who is ill, embittered, and old

before his time. Will has become an alcoholic, and has retreated to the arms of Lee (Gloria Foster). Duff visits his little son, who is receiving minimal care in the slum of another city. We see the boy as an emotional victim of his illegitimate birth. Duff has a vision of “things past” and of “things yet to come.”

Duff and Josie are happy for a time after their marriage, but Duff’s unemployment changes all that. His white employer has fired him for attempting to organize fellow blacks in protest against unfair working conditions. When Josie offers to get a job, Duff’s masculinity is insulted. In a deeply felt scene, Duff approaches Josie under the dryer in a beauty salon. She tells him to take the money he needs from her handbag. Josie radiates a quiet strength and compassion in this astonishing scene.

The death of Will Anderson seems to bring an awakening for Duff. He collects his son and returns to Josie, from whom he has separated in a moment of despair.

All the characters in NOTHING BUT A MAN ring true. A death of spirit is mirrored in Will’s eyes. One sees love and warmth in Lee’s eyes. Reverend and Mrs. Dawson maintain the proper amount of aloofness, successfully indicating their fear of militancy. Josie demonstrates a soft spoken courage. Although she has been over-protected by her parents, she will chance a life with Duff. Early in the film Josie says, “Look Duff, most of the men I know, they’re kind of dead. When I met you the other day, I had the feeling that you’re different. That’s why I went out with you. I thought we might have something to say to each other.” Duff is indeed different; he has been compared to Malcolm X:

“The current low-budget movie, Nothing But a Man, is the story of another Malcolm, fictitious yet very real, who can be found all over this land. Duff, the main character, wasn’t looking for trouble or running away from it either. His un verbalized goal in this magnificent picture was to be “nothing but a man.” That’s what Malcolm X was all about. He was the symbol of black males who, though groping, have not yet found the answer to how they can be “nothing but a man,” which is, really more than enough. (7)

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / NOTHING BUT A MAN

MATERIALS

-Video: NOTHING BUT A MAN

-Book: Photographs of the actors from the “BLACK HOLLYWOOD 1900 to 1970”

1. The actors will decide which scenes they want to work on and transcribe them from the movie. Certainly we will work on some of the scenes already described above.
2. We will discuss the dramatic conflict which is the power struggle between Duff and the racist power structure. The scenes between the high school principal and the drunken drop-outs will be explored.
3. We will talk about Dixon’s performance and how it carries the film. As actors we will deal with

how to express anger. In Dixon's amazing performance we see an actor who is maintaining and projecting a rage that is kept in check.

4. We will look at Dixon's work and point out moments when we see how anger can cut two ways. Does his anger really get at the people who try to make him feel less than a man? How do we see that his anger is also internalized.

5. Duff's relationship with his alcoholic father and illegitimate son will be explored through improvisation and character analysis. Using their imagination the actors will think of personal events in Duff's life that will be explored through improvisations on his previous life, days in his life that we do not see in the movie (e.g. the day that Duff first discovers that his father is an alcoholic. How old is he? Where is his mother? etc.) The situations the actors think of will lead to important class discussions and will deepen their understanding of the character's inner life.

SIDNEY POITIER

Sidney Poitier was born in Miami, Florida, in 1927. Both his parents were uneducated farmers from Cat Island in the Bahamas. He was brought up on Cat Island, and at the age of 15 he went back to Miami, beginning his American journey that eventually brought him to super star status in American films.

Donald Bogle makes the point that Poitier was the black star of the mid 1950s because it was the integrationist decade and he was the model integrationist hero. He was educated, intelligent, spoke proper English, and dressed conservatively. He was the complete antithesis of the black buffoons that had appeared in so many Hollywood movies.

His first movie, *NO WAY OUT* (1950), began a cycle of problem pictures made in the 1950s. He appeared in *CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY* (1952), *RED BALL EXPRESS* (1952), *GO, MAN, GO* (1953), *THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE* (1955), *EDGE OF THE NIGHT* (1957), and *THE DEFIANT ONES* (1958). Poitier continued making films, not only acting but also directing. He is currently working on a film of Nelson Mandela's life in which he plays Mandela.

The film we will be studying will be the film adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry's prize winning play *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* (1961). In the film Poitier plays Walter Lee Younger, the role he had created for the Broadway production. It is the story of the Younger family and is set in a small Southside Chicago apartment. The matriarch, Lena Younger, has dreamed of owning a house and escaping from this windowless flat. The apartment is shared with her son Walter, his wife Ruth, their young son Travis, and Lena's daughter, Beneatha. Lena's chance comes with the ten-thousand-dollar insurance check left to her by her husband. The film and play will be examined in the following lesson plan.

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / A RAISIN IN THE SUN

MATERIALS:

-Video: A RAISIN IN THE SUN

-Books: "A RAISIN IN THE SUN, the Acting Edition"

-Props: Act I,i: electric hot plate, small frying pan, toaster, and all breakfast food items needed for this scene. Act II iii: gardening hat as described in the text, gifts to Mama of the gardening tools and card.

1. We will stage Act I,i in the cafeteria of the school. The fun of this scene is really cooking and eating the family's morning breakfast. This is also an important acting task as actors are called upon to really eat in many scenes in plays and films. This takes careful planning as the actors must continue to pick up their cues, have the correct timing ,and keep the scene moving. The first laugh in the play is when Ruth asks Walter Lee "How do you want you eggs?" and he replies "Not scrambled". Ruth must immediately whip the eggs in a bowl. The audience must see this behavior and hear the eggs being whipped with a fork. This has to be perfectly timed or the actor will not get the laugh and the scene will suffer. We can cook with the electric hot plate, the toaster and share the food with the class.
2. Stage Act II,iii using all props need for this scene. The actors will divide into ensemble teams so that all the students will have a chance to play the principal characters.

LAURENCE FISHBURN

Laurence Fishburn was born in Augusta, Ga., in 1961, and raised in Brooklyn, New York. As a child actor he performed on the daytime T.V. serial ONE LIFE TO LIVE. He made his screen debut at the age of 12. Later he won a supporting role in APOCALYPSE NOW (1979) by lying about his age. He has performed on stage, most notably in August Wilson's TWO TRAINS RUNNING, for which he won a Tony award. Two important film roles have been as the father of the principle actor in BOYZ N THE HOOD (1991) and Ike Turner in WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT (1993). Other films include CORNBREAD, EARL AND ME (1975), FAST BREAK (1979), COTTON CLUB (1984),THE COLOR PURPLE (1985), and OTHELLO (1995).

We will study the play OTHELLO by William Shakespeare and the 1995 film version with Laurence Fishburn in the title role.

LESSON PLAN: ACTING EXERCISES / OTHELLO

MATERIALS:

- Video: Laurence Fishburn's OTHELLO
Laurence Olivier's HENRY V
(View sc i, ii, iii, Globe Theatre)
- Books: New Folger Library "OTHELLO", and books with drawings of the Globe Theatre, photographs of the Mediterranean, Venice, and the Island of Cyprus, maps and atlas
- Props: Two fencing foils, dagger
- Costumes: Student selected costume pieces, embroidered handkerchief

1. Studying Fishburn's performance in OTHELLO affords an excellent opportunity to team teach with the English teacher who teaches OTHELLO. We will divide into ensemble teams, and scan much of this great poetry. We will concentrate on many of the plays monologues and soliloquies.

Some of What Actors Need To Know About Shakespeare's Verse

- By writing passages in verse, Shakespeare could 'direct' an actor to stress whatever word he wanted the actor to stress.
- In this way he would give a particular meaning to the line.
- By scanning the lines the actors can use the verse to help them act the part more accurately and quicker. The actor will learn not to 'smooth out' the verse so that it sounds and plays like prose.
- Verse is easy to learn because it has a rhythm, a cadence.
- The pattern of rhythm Shakespeare mostly wrote is called iambic pentameter.
- An iamb is two syllables with the first syllable unstressed and the second syllable stressed. De-DUM
- FIVE iambs in one line of verse gives you IAMBIC pentameter (five sets of de-DUMs).
- de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM,
- Analyzing verse in this way is called scansion.

Sample of monologues / soliloques to scan, rehearse, memorize and perform:

Othello—Act I, iii.

Her father loved me, oft invited me,
Still questioned me the story of my life
From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes
That I have passed.

Othello—Act I, iii.

My life upon her faith!
(The Duke, the Senators, Cassio, and officers exit.)
Honest Iago, My Desdemona must I leave to thee.

Iago—Act I, iii

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.

Othello—Act II, i.

It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!

Iago—Act II, i.

That Cassio loves her, I do well believe 't.

Desdemona—Act III, iii.

Why then tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn,
On Tuesday noon or night; on Wednesday morn.

Othello—Act III,iii.

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities with a learned spirit

Emilia—Act III,iii.

(picking up the handkerchief)
I am glad I have found this napkin.
This was her first remembrance from the Moor.

Desdemona—Act IV,iii.

My mother had a maid called Barbary.

Othello—Act V,ii.

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.

DENZEL WASHINGTON

Denzel Washington was born in 1954 in Mt. Vernon, New York. He studied acting and performed at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. He was trained on the stage, and acted in Shakespearean and modern productions. He made his film debut in 1981. He won an academy award for best supporting actor for his role in GLORY (1989). Some of his films we may be viewing will include MISSISSIPPI MASALA (1991), MALCOLM X (1992), and MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (1993).

Since Denzel Washington is a favorite of the acting students, I will ask them to select two of his films for study. They will also be asked to share with the class photographs and articles about him and his films. I will suggest that we study his performance in MALCOLM X along with his autobiography and the play EL HAJJ MALIK: A PLAY ABOUT MALCOLM X by N.R. Davidson, Jr.

Some Acting Terms.

Action (internal or emotional)—Acting is doing. Action is what you do to get what ever it is your character wants.

Activities—The physical things you do on stage (sometimes called stage business or tasks). You might drink a cup of coffee or slice an orange, etc., while carrying on the the dialogue.

Anticipation—Basing your acting choices on the fact that you know what happens next.

Stanislavski said that one of the actor’s greatest problems was “anticipation.” The actor’s involvement must *not* be in the future, but in the *present* . Most acting techniques are designed to keep the actor focused in the present . . .”in the moment.”

Blocking—The physical arrangement of the actor’s movements on stage. It serves to tell the story physically.

Character—The person whom the actor is playing.

Choices—Choices are what you do or tell yourself so that you create the role.

Cliche—Cliche is a mannerism or approach to the role that has been done many, many times before.

Given Circumstances—This is the information in the play set down for the actor by the playwright. They are clues as to how the actor makes choices. What are the circumstances of my character? On the simplest level . . . does the play take place in or out of doors? What is the season of the year? Over how many hours, days, months, etc., does the action of the play take place? What is my character’s urgency to move through the events of the play?

Notes

1. Boskin, Joseph, “Racial Stereotyping and Popular Culture”. 7.
2. Gillum, Dorothy Butler, “Paul Robeson: All American”. 37
3. Mitchell, Lofton, “Voices of the Black Theatre”. 156.
4. Bogle, Donald, “Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks”. 41.
5. Ibid, 230.
6. Ibid. 234-235.
7. Walker, Wyatt Tee, “Nothing But a Man,” in “Malcolm X: the Man and His Time”. (edited by John Henrik Clarke) MacMillan, New York, New York,1969. 67-68.

Student Reading List

Bogle, Donald, "Brown Sugar". Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, New York, 1980. Wonderful photographs and short biographies of America's black female superstars from Ma Rainey to Donna Summer.

Bogle, Donald, "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks." Bantam Books, Inc., New York, New York, 1974. A definitive, interpretive history of blacks in American films. Excellent definitions of the 5 main black stereotypes and a sympathetic look at the struggles of black film actors.

Null, Gary, "Black Hollywood, The Black Performer in Motion Pictures." (1900 to 1970). Carol Publishing Group, New York, New York, 1975. A record in photographs and prose of the progress of the black artist in early films to 1970.

Null, Gary, "Black Hollywood, From 1970 to Today." Carol Publishing Group, New York, New York, 1993. This is a continuation of his book listed above.

Waters, Ethel, "His Eye is on the Sparrow, an Autobiography." Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1951. Ethel Waters' story told in her own words.

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Boskin, Joseph, "Racial Stereotyping and Popular Culture. From a Symposium on Black Images in Films, Stereotyping, and Self-Perception as Viewed by Black Actresses." Sponsored by Afro-American Studies and American Studies, Boston University Boston, Mass., 1974. This book is a collection of writings from the above symposium.

Bogle, Donald, "Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks." Bantam Books, Inc., New York, New York, 1974. A definitive interpretive history of blacks in American films. Excellent definitions of the 5 main black stereotypes and a sympathetic look at the struggles of black film actors.

Cripps, Thomas, "Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era." Oxford University Press, New York, New York, 1993. This book examines the idea that popular culture reflects society's values.

Diakite, Madubuko Robinson, "A Piece of the Glory." The English International Association of Lund, Sweden, 1992. This book is a survey of African-American filmmakers and their struggles with popular American myths.

Gillum, Dorothy Butler, "Paul Robeson: All American." New Republic Books, Washington D. C., 1978. This is a biography of Paul Robeson.

Jones, G. William, "Black Cinema Treasures, Lost and Found." University of North Texas Press, Denton, Texas, 1991. This book chronicles many pioneer black filmmakers.

Mapp, Edward, "Blacks in American films: Today and Yesterday." Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., 1972.

Mitchell, Lofton, "Voices of the Black Theatre." James T. White & Company, Clifton, New Jersey, 1975. This is a

book of individual recollections of black artists.

Murray, James P., "To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Super Fly." Bobbs-Merrill Co.Inc., New York, New York, 1973.

Poitier, Sidney, "This Life." Ballantine Books, New York, New York, 1980. Poitier's autobiography. It is a frank, forceful self-portrait.

Snead, James, "White Screens/Black Images." Routledge Press, New York, New York, 1994. This book demonstrates how central the representation and exclusion of blacks has been to the most powerful art form of the twentieth century.

Waters, Ethel, "His Eye is on the Sparrow, an Autobiography." Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1951. This rich autobiography of a great American woman tells her whole life story , from her illegitimate birth in the slums of Chester, Pennsylvania, to her success as a blues singer and actor.

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