

A pioneer in African-American movies

By JOHN J. DUNPHY

When we think of African-American filmmakers, names like Spike Lee and Theodore Witcher immediately come to mind or, to go back a generation, Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks. Even many film buffs, however, are unfamiliar with the life and work of Oscar Micheaux, a pioneer of African-American cinema who was born in 1884 on a farm near Metropolis, Ill., about 130 miles southeast of St. Louis.

The fifth of 13 children whose parents were former slaves, Micheaux left home at 17 for Chicago where he held a variety of jobs, including Pullman porter. He journeyed to South Dakota in 1904 to homestead and, through hard work, became worth the then-considerable sum of \$20,000 by age 24.

Two events in 1909 defined Micheaux. He saw his first minstrel show and was inspired to become a writer. He also fell in love with the daughter of a white homesteader. While the racial factor precluded their marriage, Micheaux became intrigued by the subject of interracial romance and often dealt with this theme in both his novels and films.

Micheaux completed his semi-autobiographical first novel, "The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer, V" in 1913. He traveled the Midwest and South to promote it, even, selling the book door to door.

"The Homesteader," Micheaux's third novel, appeared in 1917. It was so successful that it attracted the attention of the Lincoln Motion Picture Co. An organization of African-Americans who made films with black casts for black audiences, the Lincoln Motion Picture Co. belonged to the first wave of African-American filmmakers.

Micheaux agreed to sell film rights to the novel on the condition that he direct the production. When the company refused, Micheaux decided to film "The Homesteader" himself and so embarked on a career that included approximately 48 films intended primarily for a black audience.

Micheaux was one of the few African-American filmmakers who successfully made the transition from silent films to talkies. His 1931 picture, "The Exile," is historically significant as the first all-talking film produced by an African-American.

While Hollywood movies usually presented African-Americans as contented slaves singing and dancing on antebellum plantations to amuse their beloved masters, Micheaux's films featured all-black casts in a variety of productions that he wrote, directed, edited and distributed. Black audiences enjoyed melodramas, comedies,



Oscar Micheaux

musicals, gangster sagas and even Westerns that were all produced by the Micheaux Film Corp.

But Micheaux was not afraid to tackle controversial topics. His second film, "Within Our Gates," released in 1919, depicted a white mob lynching an innocent black sharecropper and his wife. When he tried to exhibit the film in Chicago, which recently had been torn by a race riot, African-American as well as white groups demanded that it be banned.

"Body and Soul," a 1925 production, starred Paul Robeson in his film debut in dual roles, including that of an alcoholic, lecherous minister who rapes the daughter of a woman in his congregation. The New York Censor Board condemned the film as "sacrilegious" and "immoral" and denied Micheaux a license to exhibit "Body and Soul" in the Empire State until he drastically re-edited it.

Robeson was not the only distinguished African-American actor to appear in a Micheaux production. "Lying Lips," released in 1939, featured Robert Earl Jones, the father of James Earl Jones, and Juano Her-

nandez, who would later star in such classic films as "Intruder in the Dust" and "The Pawnbroker."

Micheaux typically recruited his casts from African-American acting companies such as New York's Lafayette Players. He modeled and publicized his actors and actresses as the black counterparts to Hollywood's white superstars.

Lorenzo Tucker was billed as the "black Valentine" during the silent era and then became the "colored William Powell" with the coming of talkies. Micheaux presented the beautiful Ethel Moses as the "Negro Harlow," while Slick Chester, typecast in gangster roles, was deemed the "colored Cagney."

Micheaux's second wife, the actress Alice Russell, whom he married in 1929, appeared in a number of his films.

Micheaux operated on extremely limited budgets. He usually completed a film in about six weeks, working with a skeleton crew and employing a cameraman for just one day at a time. Studios consisted of friends' homes that possessed adequate lighting.

With such meager funding, Micheaux seldom could afford to shoot an additional take if something went wrong. When an actor flubbed his lines, he simply corrected himself and continued the scene. In at least one production, offstage technicians were inadvertently filmed by the cameraman.

Even while occupied with filmmaking, Micheaux never lost his interest in literature and wrote four additional novels during World War II. In 1948 he filmed his novel "The Wind from Nowhere," retitled "The Betrayal" for the screen, and released it as the first motion picture produced by an African-American to play in white theaters.

Unfortunately, "The Betrayal" received unfavorable reviews and was not successful. It was also Micheaux's last film. He died in 1951 while on a promotional tour.

Forgotten for many years, Micheaux is now recognized as one of the most significant figures in the history of African-American cinema and a pioneer among independent filmmakers of all races. A monument at his grave in Great Bend, Kan., bears the inscription: "A man ahead of his time."

And indeed he was.

John J. Dunphy, Godfrey, is the founder of the Metro East Writers' Workshop and teaches a writers' workshop at Lewis and Clark Community College.

For more information, see the Oscar Micheaux Society home page on the Internet at www.duke.edu/web/film/Micheaux