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Once feared lost, black films to screen at DIA; Actors, directors offer own take on Hollywood during segregation

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James Wheeler was about 9 when he first saw Spencer Williams' "The Blood of Jesus," in which a woman is shot by her husband and journeys to the crossroads between heaven and hell. He watched the movie, which featured an all-black cast, not in a theater but on a portable 16mm projector in a cafe his mother ran in Waldo, Ark. He figures it was around 1948.

"That movie, man, it made you feel like you were following the spirit of this woman all the way to heaven," remembered Wheeler, who now lives in Southfield. "As a kid growing up in the South, it all seemed so real. I can't even begin to tell you the impression that left on me."

Screening this Sunday, "The Blood of Jesus" serves as the centerpiece of "Pioneers of African-American Cinema," running primarily this weekend (and two additional dates) at the Detroit Film Theatre at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The series takes nine features from a recently released Kino Lorber set of rare black films and projects them on the DFT screen in high-definition digital. All screenings are free.

"We wanted to show several films to provide the broadest possible overview," said Elliot Wilhelm, the DIA's film curator. "We have the heralded movies of Spencer Williams and Oscar Micheaux, and others made primarily for their entertainment value, movies emulating the Hollywood product that black audiences would see at segregated theaters throughout the South."

Movies made by and for African Americans, sometimes called "race films," were shown in theaters, but more often screened in popular community gathering places like churches or cafes like the one in which Wheeler saw many of these films for the first time. For Wheeler, this led to a lifelong study of the movies and their makers, including Williams, who made "The Blood of Jesus," and Micheaux, whose ingenuity behind the camera and subject matter have made him the most famous of the early black filmmakers. Three of his titles will be shown.

Micheaux's films are often called a response to the racist images of D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation," which showed black characters (often portrayed by white actors in black face) as lazy and often evil. Yet these films also featured racial stereotypes. The stories often involved drinking, gambling and other illegal activities, with the church the sole road to salvation.

Wheeler defends the overt melodrama of these early films as an important stepping stone to more nuanced works. "Those filmmakers did what they could to get these works out and seen by the public," he said. "And sometimes, they relied on familiar stereotypes."

An exception is "The Flying Ace," a 1926 aviation drama made by Southern-born white director Richard E. Norman and featuring African Americans in roles that traditionally had been played by white actors. This Friday night offering screens in a stunning new digital restoration and with live musical accompaniment. Just over an hour long, the movie will be shown with home movies taken by the Rev. Solomon Sir Jones, who took priceless footage of African American life in his rural Oklahoma hometown.

Motown connections are strong in two of the titles. Detroit-born Herb Jeffries stars in "The Bronze Buckaroo" (1939), one of several films in which he starred as the first black singing cowboy. Jeffries (sometimes billed as Herbert Jeffrey) had a long career in movies and on television as an actor, musician and singer-songwriter. He died in 2014 at the age of 100.

The Detroit-made "Eleven P.M." (1928), which screens on Saturday afternoon, is fascinating on several levels, first for its exterior shots of black neighborhoods around the time it was made in the late 1920s and for its subject matter, which puts a surrealistic spin on a seemingly simple morality tale about a slick hoodlum who preys on the poor violinist who once tried to help him.

The movie ends with one of the strangest images in all of cinema, in which a character returns in the form of a half-man/half-dog to take revenge on the man who killed him. Wilhelm likens the movie to something from surrealist artist and poet Jean Cocteau. Along with "The Blood of Jesus," it is a must-see title in the program.

"Eleven P.M." is one of two features produced in Detroit by Cuba-born Richard Maurice, who worked as a tailor before launching the Maurice Film Co. in 1920. There are no known prints of his first feature, "Nobody's Children," from 1920, but "Eleven P.M.," which he also starred in, has only gained in reputation since it screened about 20 years ago at the DFT in a grainy and incomplete video print.

The digital restorations (more than half of them screening in professional-quality DCP) will be an eye-opener for film buffs. With a film like "Eleven P.M.," the heightened clarity will have them reading street and window signs, license plates and even manhole covers looking for clues for how Detroit found its way into the film.

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