

# Oscar Micheaux



Micheaux, Oscar (1884–1951), director, producer, novelist, and leading director in early independent African American film. Oscar Micheaux was the first major African American director to produce feature films with black characters for black audiences. Over a thirty-year period from 1919 to 1948 he wrote, directed, and produced thirty-four pictures. Among these are *Body and Soul* (1924), a silent film starring Paul Robeson in his first American movie, and *The Exile* (1931), the first African American talkie made by a black film company. Micheaux was a legendary figure in early African American film, a field that began in earnest after the appearance of D. W. Griffith's controversial *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The great public outcry over the racism in Griffith's film created an underground movement of black filmmakers intent on presenting a more realistic appraisal of African American life.

Micheaux was born in Illinois and after a short period as a farmer and Pullman car porter turned his efforts to writing novels for black audiences. Over a ten-year period Micheaux wrote and self-published ten novels. In 1918 he founded the Oscar Micheaux Corporation in Harlem, New York, and turned to producing and directing films. After a series of short films he made *The Homesteader* (1919), based on his own novel. In rapid succession during the 1920s and 1930s Micheaux made many films, among them: *Sons of Satan* (1922), *Birthright* (1924), *Wages of Sin* (1929), *Underworld* (1936), and *God's Stepchildren* (1937). Micheaux was also an indefatigable promoter of his creations, touring the country to publicize and finance his films. He convinced white theater owners to have special showings for black audiences; he also distributed his films to approximately one hundred black theaters. Filming on a shoestring budget, Micheaux used black actors and actresses anxious for work in films, among them Lorenzo Tucker, Ethel Moses, and Bee Freeman. Reputedly over six feet tall, Micheaux dressed in large black coats and wide-brimmed hats. As a maverick director he often chose his players on a whim and had them work without repeated takes. The films were shot in convenient locations such as friends' homes and hastily constructed sets. Although most films were shot in less than six weeks, Micheaux created films showing black life on realistic terms while also providing entertainment for the black masses. His films contained a range of types and attempted to show that blacks were often just as rich, educated, and cultured as whites.

Recently Micheaux has been criticized for presenting a class system based on color in his movies. Often the most affluent or successful blacks in his films are the lightest-

skinned with the straightest hair. Although the nightclub and cabaret scenes in Micheaux's films provide valuable insight into black music and dance, some critics suggest they may have been added to entice white audiences to his films. Nevertheless Micheaux's strongest films confront the race problem head on while presenting the lifestyle and attitudes of the black middle class. His heroes and heroines suffer through conventional romantic and financial crises complicated by the issues of passing and racial prejudice. In their own way Micheaux's films make a plea for black unity and black independence through education and economic competition while presenting a positive image for black audiences.

Micheaux successfully fashioned almost singlehandedly a popular black cinema and a black star system that provided a prototype for African American independent cinema in general. He created dynamic roles for aggressive black female actresses and many of his films featured females in the stronger roles. He gave black actors and actresses roles far different from the usual Hollywood stereotype of servants, Uncle Toms, and buffoons. Micheaux's extravagant personality, great creative flair, and independent vision made him a visionary filmmaker who could connect with the black audiences of the period. He examined and explored the shared, collective attitudes and outlooks of African Americans between the wars in a large body of films, many of which are now lost. Micheaux worked in both silent and sound film, one of the few black directors to bridge this important transitional era in American cinema. His final dream of widespread black and white audiences for his films was not to be. Micheaux's last film, *Betrayal* (1948), opened in New York at a white theater and received major attention from the press, but the public took little notice and the movie failed. Soon after, Micheaux died in relative obscurity, and his films remained neglected for over thirty years.

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