

The Emperor Jones

By Scott Allen Nollen

The son of William Drew Robeson, an escaped slave who became a Presbyterian minister, and Maria Louisa Bustill, a teacher who died when he was six, Paul Leroy Robeson (1898-1976) became an African American “Renaissance Man,” attaining success as a scholar, athlete, multi-lingual singer, stage and film actor, and the first artist-activist in the United States. He appeared in just a dozen films, but his groundbreaking performances comprise a unique achievement in World Cinema and helped pave the way for later African American actors.

The third Black student to attend Rutgers University, he became known nationwide as “Robeson of Rutgers,” attaining 14 varsity letters and two All-American titles as a football star. In 1920, enamored with the Harlem Renaissance, he attended Columbia Law School, where he earned an LL.B. degree three years later. After playing professional football to pay for his education, he chose not to practice law. Instead, possessing a well-articulated and powerful speaking and singing voice, he focused on a theatrical career, both as a stage actor and concert singer.

Robeson spent many years in England and Europe attempting to find opportunities unavailable in his homeland. During the late 1920s, when Al Jolson, a Lithuanian-born immigrant wearing blackface, made cinematic history in *The Jazz Singer* and other popular follow-up films in Hollywood, Robeson was starring in the original British stage version of Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern’s *Show Boat* in London’s West

End. His other stage successes included the all-Black revue

Shuffle Along (1922), Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1924-1925) and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1924), and Dorothy and DuBose Heyward’s *Porgy* (1928). He made his feature-film debut, playing two radically different characters in African American writer-director Oscar Micheaux’s independently produced *Body and Soul* (1925).

Closing the decade with his critically acclaimed performances in the British *Show Boat*, Robeson became the first African American performer to attain top billing in mainstream motion pictures. One film made in the United States, *The Emperor Jones* (1933), was followed by several in Great Britain, including *Sanders of the River* (1935), *Song of Freedom* (1936), *King Solomon’s Mines* (1937), *Jericho* (1938) and *The Proud Valley* (1940).

For the screen adaptation of *The Emperor Jones*, Eugene O’Neill insisted that Robeson, in transforming his successful stage role, receive above-the-title billing. Robeson agreed to act in the film, only if it was shot in the North. Producers John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran, creating a company independent of the Hollywood studios, with distribution through United Artists, completed the entire production at Paramount’s studio in Astoria, Queens, and in Westchester. The director, Dudley Murphy, had worked on two 1929 shorts featuring African American jazz legends:

Black and Tan (Duke Ellington) and *St. Louis Blues* (Bessie Smith).

O'Neill's play begins with Brutus Jones serving as Emperor on an island in the West Indies, with his adventures told in flashback. The film's opening credits hint at Jones' destination by featuring dancing natives, but the narrative begins when these primitive images dissolve to modern African Americans at South Carolina's Hezekiah Baptist Church. The preacher prevails upon the congregation to pray for Jones, who will travel to the North to work as a Pullman Porter. In the end, Brutus Jones, a modern African American who adopts repressive colonial ways upon encountering a primitive Black culture, is destroyed.

Released in September 1933, the film did well at the box office. Most critics lauded Robeson but decried the stereotypes. Nonetheless, his work was considered a step forward for African American film actors. Murphy's brisk direction benefits from Ernest Haller's chiaroscuro cinematography, Herman Rosse's gritty art direction, and Grant Whytock's editing.

In a cast including African American actress Fredi Washington and British character actor Dudley Digges, Robeson carefully builds his characterization, ranging from an ambitious working-class man with somewhat selfish intentions, to a completely self-interested dictator, to a broken man haunted by his past behavior. The actor's most difficult challenge was attempting to affect, with some believability, Jones' sudden psychic shift from courageous conman to superstitious madman. His charismatic smile, the most distinguishing characteristic of his physical performance style, conveys a full range of emotional states, from optimistic anticipation to personal triumph, from insidious intent to

borderline insanity.

Considering that there was no Civil Rights Movement at the time, Robeson's achievement, though compromised by offensive language and the primitivism inherent in the depictions of the Black characters, was no small one. His Brutus Jones was the first lead role portrayed by an African American in a mainstream motion picture, an accomplishment that would not be matched by another Black actor in the United States for a quarter-century.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress

*Historian Scott Allen Nollen has written more than 30 books on the history of film, literature and music, including *Louis Armstrong: The Life, Music and Screen Career* (2004) and *Paul Robeson: Film Pioneer* (2011). His latest book, with Yuyun Yuningasih Nollen, is *Karloff and the East: Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern and Oceanian Characters and Subjects in His Screen Career* (2020).*

