

“Within Our Gates” (1920)

By Daniel Eagan



Evelyn Preer in Oscar Micheaux's "Within Our Gates" (1920)

Printed with permission by the author from the America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry, Bloomsbury Academic, 2009.

African-Americans appeared on film as early as 1895, at first as objects of ethnic curiosity, and later in the same stereotyped terms used on the stage in minstrel and blackface shows. Titles like “Watermelon Feast” and “Dancing Darkies” (both 1896) fed off prejudice, one of the reasons why historian Thomas Cripps feels that were largely indifferent to early film. Selig’s “Something Good – Negro Kiss” (1900), a “Burlesque on the John Rice and May Irwin Kiss,” may have tried to approach its audience in a different manner, but for the most part early movies depicted African-Americans in harshly unflattering terms.

By 1910, when William Foster began the black-operated Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago, there were over two hundred movie theaters owned by blacks, a number that grew to close to seven hundred within a decade. Foster, later a prominent publicist, specialized in comedies, but the market also included black-oriented newsreels and “race” films produced and financed by whites. The release of “The Birth of a Nation” in 1915 sparked a public outcry against its racism, and became a rallying point for black filmmakers as well as organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). But while an audience existed for black films, even an established actor like Noble Johnson, a former rodeo star who entered films in 1909, had to struggle for financing. Johnson formed Lincoln Films with his brother George, but relied on parts of Hollywood films to make a living.

Oscar Micheaux took a different approach to movies, one that proved viable for a number of other filmmakers as well. Born on an Illinois farm in 1884, Micheaux worked in Chicago before developing a farm in South Dakota. Details, drawn mostly from his autobiographical novels, are sketchy, but he apparently decided to become an author after seeing a minstrel show in 1909. Around this time he fell in love with the daughter of a white rancher; this thwarted romance became one of the central elements of his fiction. He sold his first book, "The Conquest," door-to-door through the Midwest and then on a tour of the South. Micheaux used the same method to finance and sell two subsequent novels, writing mainstream stories for a specific audience. Lincoln Films offered to adapt "The Homesteader" (1917), but Micheaux wanted to direct the project himself. He sold shares in the film, which he shot in the Selig studios in Chicago. By touring with the film, especially in the South, Micheaux made a profit of \$5,000, enough to start work on another project, "Within Our Gates."

Micheaux knew that he was not going to sell books, shares, or movie tickets by telling his audience that things were just fine. "Within Our Gates" (even the title is inflammatory) would tackle the most controversial aspects of race head on. At the same time, the director knew he had to cushion viewers and, perhaps more important, censors, from the full impact of his images. He had to surround scenes of lynching and interracial rape with a story line that was as inoffensive as possible, one that implicated his target audience almost as much as society as a whole. It was a difficult balancing act, one that is, for a number of reasons, almost impossible to judge fairly today.

Micheaux's plot revolves around Sylvia Landry (played by Evelyn Preer), a schoolteacher whose engagement to surveyor Conrad Drebert (James D. Ruffin) is ruined by a jealous divorcee and her criminal brother. Sylvia travels south to work at a school for Negroes, but returns to Boston out of sense of duty to her race. She meets Dr. Vivian, who is "passionately engaged in social questions," and tries to persuade a white philanthropist to finance black education. It's not until almost an hour into the movie that Micheaux unleashes an extended flashback about Sylvia's early life. In it, a wealthy white landowner rapes one of his black workers in a scene that mirrors a black man's assault on Lillian Gish in "The Birth of a Nation." Micheaux also includes a double lynching, seen for the first time on film from a black's viewpoint. Lynching has been shown on film as early as 1904, in "Avenging a Crime," but Micheaux's version has a matter-of-fact quality that is chilling.

When Micheaux opened the film in Chicago and Detroit in January 1920, he faced immediate criticism from both the white and black press. As with "The Birth of a Nation," authorities used the threat of race riots to demand cuts. Micheaux, who could afford to print only four copies of the film, had trouble in Shreveport, Louisiana and Omaha, Nebraska, as well. He didn't even try to exhibit "Within Our Gates" in New York. (He did open his third film, "The Brute," there, because he could pay for nine prints instead of four.)

The notoriety helped "Within Our Gates" achieve a long life in secondary markets – in churches and schools, for example. Micheaux, meanwhile, continued to make movies, by most counts

over forty features in a thirty-year span. Among these are “Body and Soul” (1925), Paul Robeson’s film debut, and “The Exile” (1931), his first sound film.

On an aesthetic level, “Within Our Gates,” can seem awkward, even unformed. Micheaux’s budget – somewhere between \$5,000 and \$15,000 – precluded expensive production values. The acting often seems unrefined, or perhaps under-rehearsed. It may not have been entirely the talent’s fault. Evelyn Preer had appeared in Micheaux’s “The Homesteader,” and was a member of the Lafayette Players, a well-regarded New York troupe. The differing acting styles may not be entirely Micheaux’s fault either, just as the film’s chaotic, at times, incomprehensible plotting could be the result of other factors.

Recent critics have come up with various rationalizations for Micheaux’s “imperfect” cinema, for shots that don’t match, gaps in temporal or spatial logic, story lines that careen into unexpected tangents. Manthia Diawara, for one, writes that Micheaux’s “loose editing” is like improvisation in jazz, that how the director “misreads and improves upon Hollywood logic is a powerful metaphor for the way in which African-Americans survived... within a hostile economic and racist system.”

But the “Within Our Gates” we see today is not the version Micheaux showed in 1920. In fact, the film was considered lost for years. The single surviving print, dating probably from the 1920s and retitled “La Negra,” was found in Spain. Only four of the original intertitles remained. Some of the incoherence of the extant film is due to the missing intertitles, as well as the generally poor shape of the materials. Who knows how many people cut or rearranged or duplicated the remaining footage? (“Body and Soul” is the only Micheaux feature with intact intertitles. Working from a translation by Kathleen Newman, Scott Simmons - assisted by Alex Vargas – reconstructed new titles for the restored version of “Within Our Gates.”

Given these qualifications, Micheaux’s achievement is all the more remarkable. The filmmaker could compose and edit wonderful material, like a sequence of Sylvia crossing a Boston street through heavy traffic, the camera providing dynamic angles while quick cutting establishes a jazzy tempo. His characters have a self-awareness that is highly unusual for the period, such as a corrupt preacher who realizes that “Hell is my destiny.” To even suggest that blacks faced problems unrelated to racism or oppression from whites was in itself noteworthy. On top of these achievements, Micheaux’s biggest contribution may have been proving to others that it was possible to make and exhibit movies independently from the motion picture industry.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress. The film was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 1992.

Daniel Eagan has worked for Warner Bros., MGM, and other studios as a researcher and story analyst. He edited HBO’s Guide to Movies on Videocassette and Cable TV (Harper Collins) and MGM: When the Lion Roars (Turner Publishing), to which he also contributed articles. His work has appeared in Smithsonian, The Nation, The Hollywood Reporter, and other outlet