

The Emperor Jones

USA | 1933 | 76 minutes

Credits

Director	Dudley Murphy
Screenplay	DuBose Heyward (based on the play by Eugene O'Neill)
Photography	Ernest Haller
Music	Frank Tours

Cast

Brutus Jones	Paul Robeson
Smithers	Dudley Digges
Jeff	Frank H. Wilson
Undine	Fredi Washington

In Brief

Playwright Eugene O'Neill's early work often combined memorable characters and stories with social commentary and innovative theatrical concepts. Among his first great successes was *The Emperor Jones*, starring the single finest black actor of the 1920s and 1930s, the legendary Paul Robeson.

When United Artists purchased the screen rights, Robeson went with the package, and this 1933 film was the result.

The story concerns a black man of the depression era who lacks the moral stamina to resist the various temptations set before him, and who ultimately finds himself on a remote island where he uses his superior intellect and physically intimidating presence to set himself up as "Emperor." But his own past troubles have hardened him. Instead of ruling in justice, he uses his position to bleed the population, leading to revolt.

Robeson's great role in Eugene O'Neill's play is restored to its original filmed magnificence in this new print from the Library of Congress. The rise of a Pullman porter from the fields of South Carolina to the despotic command of an island nation is shown defiantly, without a hint of the servility common to depiction of African Americans on the screen in the 1930s. "Brutus Jones lied, murdered, gambled, swore and took advantage of the naivete of fellow blacks. But, he also blackmailed his white employer on a private Pullman car, forced the white Cockney trader Smithers to "talk polite" to him and light his cigarette (the famous "Smithers, a cigarette") brazenly took control of the island and assumed the role of Emperor with both style and daring. Nothing like this had ever been shown on the American screen." (Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie).



Robeson is a unique figure in the annals of American entertainment. His father, a slave, ran away from a North Carolina plantation in 1860, eventually working his way through college and becoming a minister. Robeson won a scholarship to Rutgers University, when few African Americans went to other than historically black colleges. He was Phi Beta Kappa and an All-American football player. His senior thesis was "The 14th Amendment, the Sleeping Giant of the American Constitution" which analyzed the possible uses of Constitutional law in the fight for Civil Rights. He earned a law degree from Columbia Law School, as well as playing three years of professional football. He did not just act in Eugene O'Neill's plays, *The Emperor Jones*, and *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, but was a valued member of the Bohemian circle of the Provincetown Players, discussing and shaping the plays with the author. His wife said that the times he spent in O'Neill's theatrical utopia "were really responsible for Paul's choice of the stage as his career." *The Emperor Jones* was O'Neill's first critical success (starring Charles Gilpin, not Robeson, at first) and the Provincetown Players' first brush with financial solvency. The play was a first for black actors, a dramatic lead role in the legitimate theater.

Robeson played the part of Brutus Jones, as well as Othello, in London. The success he experienced when Jerome Kern wrote the song "Ol' Man River" for him in *Showboat* was unprecedented. His first protest against the lyrics was in the 1928 London production. He insisted on changing "Niggers all work on the Mississippi" to the less insulting at the time, "Darkies all work on the Mississippi." Robeson sang the song with deep understanding and passion. "The effect on his almost totally white British audiences was overpowering, as one reviewer put it, 'tears sprang unbidden.' Robeson's interpretation of the song changed the face of the entire musical, transforming it from a white production replete with racist stereotypes and built around the overdone theme of the tragic mulatto to a show in which Robeson in the minor part of Joe was the main attraction. "He brought such power and dignity to this song that no one who heard him ever forgot the experience." (Boyle and Bunie). He made the show an enormous hit and was lionized in England, a country that had scant experience with black people. When Robeson was rehearsing for the London revival of *The Emperor Jones*, the stage manager commiserated with the director on how hard it must be to teach the actor his speeches, assuming his illiteracy. He was told Robeson was both a lawyer and a Phi Beta Kappa. The stage manager was puzzled, "Well, if that's the case, what is all this race business you have in America?"

Robeson performed on both the dramatic and concert stage in Europe, and he was loathe to leave the more racially tolerant

Paul Robeson

The Emperor Jones



atmosphere of Europe to star in the film version of *The Emperor Jones*. Samuel Goldwyn had tried to buy the film rights, but O'Neill was appalled when he discovered that the producer intended to cast opera singer Lawrence Tibbett, who would perform the role in blackface. Instead, he sold the rights to a pair of independent producers who cleaned up distributing the German film *Madchen in Uniform* about lesbianism in a girls' school. They longed to cast Robeson in his famous stage role, which he played in two New York revivals, as well as London and Berlin. Robeson was reluctant, and made many stipulations in his contract, not the least of which was that he would not be required to travel below the Mason-Dixon line, even though filming had been scheduled in a Charleston, SC area swamp.

The forces that created *The Emperor Jones* were described by Thomas Cripps as "the finest living black actor-singer, a white director with a yen for Harlem nightlife, the greatest living American playwright, a sharpening of the NAACP urge towards racial integration, a depression-ridden white studio eager to hire out its disused facilities, a white writer with a good ear for poor black patois, two neophytes in the movie business who had made a bundle of cash by distributing an arty German movie, and a black press willing to watch the offspring of such a complex union with an open mind."

DuBose Heyward, author of *Porgy*, would adapt the play for the screen. He added scenes which showed Brutus Jones' life before the island (related in dialogue on stage) and romantic relationships reflecting Robeson's intense personal magnetism. The text of the play, all of which took place on the island would remain virtually intact. The score would reflect African, Gullah, 20s jazz and voodoo themes. The drums which accompany the hallucinatory last sequence are supposed to begin at the rate of a heart beat, 72 times a minute; they underscored nearly all of the stage play. The

director was white, but he had directed a couple of fine shorts with African-American themes, "Black and Tan" with Duke Ellington and "St. Louis Blues" starring Bessie Smith. The film was shot at the Astoria Studios in Queens (now the American Museum of the Moving Image). Swamp vegetation was transported from the Florida Everglades, animals roamed the set, and in one case 250 tranquilized flies were loosed for tropical atmosphere.

Robeson considered himself a singer and was uneasy about performing for the camera (even though he had acted in two silent films, one for black auteur Oscar Micheaux). Cecil B. De Mille's brother William, a playwright and director was called in as a coach for the star, with special emphasis on the prolonged jungle monologue.

The censors of the Hays office had numerous complaints about the film, but one of the most severe was that the light skinned Fredi Washington, who plays Undine, would have to wear darker make-up, so audiences would not mistake her for white. Manoedi Maskote, a genuine African chieftan, suffered the same indignity, although he protested in vain that Africans came in varying skin tones. Even more puzzling, Washington is not allowed to wear glamour make-up, not even lipstick. Note also Harold Nicholas, half of the famed Nicolas Brothers duo dancing solo in a nightclub sequence.

Although the film is tainted by the racist attitudes of the time, Brutus Jones reflects both the fate of a Greek tragic hero, and the self-made criminal career trajectory of the modern gangster, a hugely popular archetype of the time. "Like so many Depression protagonists, Brutus Jones is a doomed and deranged self-made man in a society closed to self-transformations." (Doherty). "Dere's little stealing like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does. For the little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks." This speech could be Scarface's or Little Caesar's or Cagney's Public Enemy.

Robeson felt "O'Neill had got what no other playwright has--that is, the true authentic Negro psychology. He has read the Negro and has felt the Negro's racial tragedy." As for his performance, "As I act, civilization falls away from me. My plight becomes real, the horrors terrible facts. I feel the terror of the slave mart, the degradation of man bought and sold into slavery. Well, I am the son of an emancipated slave and the stories of old father are vivid on the tablets of my memory." (Musser).

In the circles of the intelligentsia no forthcoming picture has won half the interest of *The Emperor Jones*, Eugene O'Neill's sensational play, which has been made into a moving picture by DuBose Heywood. This is the first still of the picture drama. It has an all-negro cast, with the exception of Dudley Digges, and the leading role will be played by Paul Robeson, who stands at the top of his profession, and indeed, of his race. Robeson, whose singing of spirituals has brought him world fame, is a graduate of Columbia Law School, holds the degree of L.L.D. from Rutgers and speaks many languages.

O'Neill's inspiration may have been Jung; he was captivated by the notion of the collective unconscious and looked on his hero as embodying the black race memory. *The Emperor Jones*, along with *The Hairy Ape* and *Anna Christie* were all written and produced in 1920-21. "In each play, the central character is one of the insulted and injured: one a Negro, another a stoker, the third a prostitute. But whereas for most of us the plight of such people immediately evokes the social forces which have insulted and injured them, for O'Neill

The Emperor Jones



these forces are scarcely to be noticed, or, if noticed, they are to be passed over. For O'Neill, the social insult and injury are not so much facts in themselves as symbols of man's cosmic situation." (Trilling). It should also be noted, that in each of them, O'Neill attempted to lend verisimilitude by writing in dialect, a technique that today we tend to find demeaning in and of itself.

The film played successfully in both black and white theaters, and Robeson reaped enthusiastic reviews. Regina Crewe of the New York American went so far as to say the film showed "the finest acting ever seen on stage or screen." But then, the backlash began, especially from African American audiences and critics, who felt betrayed by the use of the word "nigger" throughout the film. The Amsterdam News's Ted Poston wrote, "Despite the fact that Brutus Jones was a killer, despite the fact that he exploited his Negro subjects far more ruthlessly than the white man who preceded him, the (black) audience--or the major part of it--fairly worshipped him. Worshipped him with continuous applause even after he had done the unforgivable thing--said to a white man, 'We niggers understand each other.' Every utterance of the banned epithet brought a chorus of tch-tch-tches of course, but this didn't dampen the fans' ardor for the

next step upward of the Emperor Jones." Eventually, an edited version for black audiences missing the offensive word was circulated. William Nunn, Jr., a leading black columnist of the day said the film was one "every man, woman and child of the Negro race should see" but in the edited version, "where you can maintain your race-pride and self-respect without having to be insulted or offended." (Boyle and Bunie).

As the years went by and Robeson's politics became more radical. "O! Man River" changed again from "You get a little drunk and you land in jail" to, "You show a little spunk and you land in jail." After World War II he became more and more outspoken, both in his support for civil rights and human rights around the world. His sympathy with communism--there was no anti-black prejudice in the Soviet Union, he felt, was reviled, and he struggled for years against the House on Un-American Activities Committee which barred him from performing. "Paul Robeson became the first of the controversial black political prisoners, the first of our great black artists to have his art denied him because of his political beliefs." (Bogle). And, Rob Edelman writes, "Had Robeson been born white, or born in a more tolerant era, every school child in American would speak his name along with Muhammad Ali's and Martin Luther King's.

The Library of Congress has worked three years on this restoration of The Emperor Jones. The Library had most of the negative in its vaults, minus the picture for the first reel, and the sound for the final reel. The goal was to restore the print as much as possible to how it was assembled when it left the studio, with shots of Brutus Jones killing a prison guard, and having his cigarette lit by a white man, as well as 34 uses of the word "nigger." Sought, but never found were two dream sequences where Robeson remembers passage on a slave ship and being sold. Valuable elements were found at the Museum of Modern Art, the National Archives of Canada and in the private collection of the late collector Raymond Rohauer. The missing soundtrack was retrieved from a Vitaphone disc from another private collection. Most movies had their soundtracks on the film by 1933, unlike in the earliest days, when some synchronized with 78 discs with the soundtrack cued with the celluloid. Rarely would a film use Vitaphone discs at this late date, but this one did... perhaps because it was a print destined for the black movie houses for whom a conversion to sound came later because of the expense of the technology. The film was restored, frame by frame, correcting, cleaning, patching and printing. The two dream sequences never surfaced, but the restoration experts involved in the project have not given up hope. This print recently premiered at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., with an audience, on film, not video or DVD. "We always have that in the back of our minds," says head of the Motion Picture Conservation Center for the Library of Congress, Ken Weissman. "The preservation, not so much of the films themselves, but to preserve the experience of the cinema."

But first, Black and Tan starring Duke Ellington and his Orchestra. This 1929 musical short, directed by Dudley Nichols, also features Fredi Washington, without dark make-up. Her dance number in a Cotton Club-ish nightspot was meant to evoke the style of Josephine Baker. While it may begin with a version of the cringe-inducing racial stereotypes of the day, Ellington's suave self-possession and innate dignity serve as a reproach to the caricatures. His film debut emphasized his brilliant music, not his status as an entertainer.

c.moviedivaFebruary2003

EDINBURGH
FILM
GUILD

Paul Robeson