

Backstory as Black Story: The Cinematic Reinvention of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

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While Eugene O'Neill's 1920 tragedy *The Emperor Jones* remains one of his most famous titles, it is rarely performed today, due largely to continuing controversy over its depiction of race. Until a much praised 2009 Irish Repertory Theatre staging the play had not appeared Off Broadway in five decades and, according to the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com), had no Broadway revival since the original star, Charles Gilpin, played a return engagement in 1927.¹ Tellingly, the most widely seen and highly regarded American production in the last generation has been the one most critical of O'Neill's characterization of his African-American hero—the avant-garde Wooster Group's revisionist take (premiered 1992 and revived many times since) in which Jones was played by a white actress in a deliberately grotesque blackface performance.²

With live productions so infrequent, it is chiefly in the form of its 1933 film adaptation that *The Emperor Jones* survives, especially now that it has recently been restored by the Library of Congress and reissued on DVD in 2003.³ But far from a photographed play, the movie *Jones* is in large part its own original drama, the fruit of a totally separate collaboration between director Dudley Murphy and screenwriter DuBose Heyward. Faced with the challenge of ex-

panding O'Neill's fifty-page one-act play into a feature-length film, Murphy and Heyward went far beyond the usual "opening up" of Broadway-to-Hollywood adaptations and created an original backstory of their own for the hero Brutus Jones that, while built upon elements hinted at by O'Neill, ultimately transforms his story significantly. (It also makes up more than half the film's running time.) While the character of O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" is introduced to us as a larger-than-life tyrant from the start, Murphy and Heyward's "Brutus" is a common man, faced with the temptations of everyday life. And while the 1920 play is a modernist allegorical fable, marked by primitivist Negro stereotypes, the film aims instead for a more realistic depiction of the lives of everyday African Americans, as opposed to the "ignorant bush niggers" of the play.

The play *The Emperor Jones* first opened at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village on 1 November 1920. The thirty-two-year-old O'Neill had already been celebrated by the Provincetown's elite bohemian audience for a number of European-influenced, experimental short plays. (And just months before *Jones*, he exploded onto the larger scene of American drama with the Broadway premiere of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beyond the Horizon*.) *Jones* was initially hailed as a Jungian psychological study of man's "collective unconscious," illustrated most obviously through a series of visions Jones experiences of the history of his race, including slave ships and auctions. (Since the small stage of the Provincetown did not allow for much visual spectacle, the play relied on the sound of pulsating "tom-tom" drums and fluidly changing cyclorama effects for its modernist, primitivist aesthetic.) After a month downtown, the play transferred to a much larger Broadway theater, playing to a more affluent and middlebrow, yet still overwhelmingly white, audience. Its success there encouraged three subsequent Broadway return engagements throughout the 1920s.

Such an aesthetically and racially challenging "property," though, would not likely have been made into a motion picture were it not for the personal interest and determination of director Dudley Murphy, who began lobbying O'Neill for the rights to the play in the mid-twenties, before the advent of talking pictures (Delson 125). The playwright was ultimately won over not only by Murphy's passion for the material, but for his track record as an independent film maker not in the service of Hollywood clichés and formulas. Murphy's already impressive body of work at this point (he was 36 when he directed *Emperor Jones*) reached across many genres and often broke cultural, aesthetic, or racial boundaries. *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), made in collaboration with French modernist painter Fernand Léger, was an abstract, almost Dadaist silent film, and two 1929 jazz shorts featured prominent African-American performers hitherto rarely seen by American mass audiences: *Black and Tan*

with Duke Ellington, and *St. Louis Blues* with Bessie Smith (her only screen appearance). His fluency in both modernist aesthetics and contemporary black culture—especially music—made Murphy an ideal candidate to translate *Emperor Jones* to the screen. He also happily agreed to O'Neill's one non-negotiable demand—the casting of Paul Robeson in the lead role—at a time when Hollywood studios almost never billed a black actor above the title.⁴

Once O'Neill finally gave Murphy his blessing, the director was fortunate to find like-minded collaborators who were also Hollywood outsiders sharing his attraction to the play and to controversial racial and political subjects. His producers were the novice team of John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran, recent Ivy League graduates whose only film experience had been the successful 1932 distribution of an unlikely German import, *Mädchen in Uniform*, a story of lesbian student-teacher relations in a girls school. They also had just produced (in April 1933) the US and English-language premiere of Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* on Broadway, which was still so unknown to American audiences that it closed after only ten performances.

The job of adapting the stage play into a screenplay went to DuBose Heyward. As the playwright of *Porgy* (1927)—perhaps the most widely known white play about African Americans at that time other than *Emperor Jones*—Heyward in retrospect seems an obvious and natural choice, but at the time he had never worked in films and was known primarily as a regional poet of the South. (*Porgy* began as a novel in 1925; Heyward's wife Dorothy shared credit with him for the stage adaptation, his first play.) What seems to have mattered most to Murphy was Heyward's reputation for credibly dramatizing African-American life. A white, blue-blooded South Carolinian, he had made his specialty the documentation of the Negro populations of his homeland, especially the Gullah Island region, the setting for *Porgy*. Engaging Heyward to adapt O'Neill's drama was a sign that the *Jones* film sought to foreground African-American contemporary life in a way quite different from the play's symbolic portrayal of primitivist symbols and historical legends on a mysterious island.⁵

In the negotiating of rights, O'Neill accepted that his relatively short play would require additional material to qualify for a feature-length release. Murphy's biographer Susan Delson reports that, before hiring Heyward, he wrote his own proposed outline for O'Neill in 1929 and that "Heyward's script took its cue not only from O'Neill's play but from the treatment Murphy had written" (128). But Heyward had more work cut out for him than that, as he discussed shortly after the release of the film:

This job required a rather unusual problem for the adaptor. What it required was a piece of straight creative writing which would preface the play, and which, when completed, would merge with the play without

any break or jolt in story or characterization. I first analyzed O'Neill's play, especially the opening scene with Jones and Smithers, and from what scraps of background thrown out in the exposition that he gave me I constructed a framework of Jones' early life. To this framework I added the character of the earlier Jones, as I had imagined it. [. . .] The incidents which I used in the early part of the screen play, I either got from O'Neill's exposition, or built in to reveal character under action. (Lewin 59-60)

The few "scraps" of exposition provided by O'Neill still required much "straight creative writing" and "imagination," leading to a screenplay as much Heyward's as O'Neill's—if not more so.

The play's dialogue and stage directions reveal only the following clues about Brutus Jones' history: that he was once "a member in good standing of the Baptist church" (1042)⁶; that he worked as a Pullman railway porter for ten years (1035); that he was imprisoned in the States for killing another black man over a craps game (1038, 1047-1048); that he escaped jail after killing a prison guard (1038, 1050-1051); that he arrived on the island as a "stowaway" (1035); and that after two years of working for the crooked British tradesman, Smithers, took power himself in the midst of a chaotic "revolution" (1034, 1036). It must have been a challenge for Murphy and Heyward to string these details into a coherent dramatic lead-in for the main body of O'Neill's story. But they clearly became so immersed in this background that what is technically their "prologue" to the play ultimately took up the first two-thirds of the film's 75-minute running time.⁷

It is one thing for an audience to hear these disjointed facts dished out piecemeal in the course of a play; it is quite another to see them enacted in sequence, as they are in the film. One effect of this is to give Jones' ultimate brutality and ruthlessness a social context. He is no longer the innate brute (hence "Brutus") implied by O'Neill, but a man from simple rural origins who has grown increasingly reckless and ruthless from all the trials and tribulations of the black male in modern America. Thus, by fully restoring a "first act" to the life of Brutus Jones—and by elevating O'Neill's background details to equal, if not greater weight than the body of his original text—the film offers the spectator a qualitatively different overall story.⁸ While the play introduces Jones already at great heights and can only offer his quick and precipitous tragic fall, the film tells the "rise and fall" of a man whom we first meet in much more humble circumstances. That Jones is shown here first as an African American *in America* (before he reinvents himself as an "emperor") was especially significant in an era when black characters were rarely endowed by Hollywood with any clear subjectivity at all, let alone made the protagonist.

Murphy and Heyward's individual obsessions with African-American subject matter for serious drama (as opposed to minstrelsy or other derogatory comedy) carried political weight in the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially in a country still largely officially segregated in both private and public spheres. Heyward initially saw himself as a kind of ethnographic writer, following in the footsteps of his mother who wrote and toured as a "dialect recitalist" imparting the folklore and language of the Gullah people to white audiences (Hutchisson *xi*). While his sympathy with this local Negro population seems to have initially been personal and sentimental, he apparently became more radicalized after his trips to Harlem during the Broadway run of *Porgy* in 1927. For the following few years, according to biographer James Hutchisson, Heyward's

progressive-mindedness then grew, and he used his writing to become more openly a social reformer and to adopt a more critical view of race and class in the South. In fact, in the late 1920s and early 1930s Heyward openly aligned himself with several liberal reformers....[B]y the time he wrote *Mamba's Daughters* [1929] he had traded this vision of race relations for a more realistic, even sociological view of class and color issues that sometimes approaches the work of southern proletarian authors. (*xxix*, *xxx*)

Heyward also served during this period on various civil rights-oriented charities and committees, including the Association of Negro Writers and the Writer's League Against Lynching. The fact that he was reaching his height as a political writer and activist at the very moment he was offered the *Emperor Jones* screenplay may or may not have been a coincidence; but it surely must have inflected the work he put into its composition in 1933—a peak moment of radicalism in the United States at large, due to the severity of the Great Depression.⁹

The cinematic *Emperor Jones* "prologue," then, can be read as a decidedly progressive film text when Murphy and Heyward's contributions are appreciated in the context of radical and racial politics in 1933 and when compared to the relative absence of explicit social commentary in O'Neill's more abstract play. Heyward's plotting of the scenario highlights the everyday segregated experience of the African-American "forgotten man" and Murphy aggressively fills the screen with diverse and diversely talented black performers. While the play is an expressionist dreamscape about the death of a dictator, the film tells a picaresque epic of the rise and fall of a common Pullman porter.

After an opening title sequence of tribal drummers (recalling and foreshadowing the play's primitivist "tom-tom" motif), Murphy begins the film in Jones' South Carolina Baptist church. The cross-fading of the drumming

and the hymn singing certainly reinforces essentialist tropes of Negroes as inherently musical. But the film's attention to detail in the church sequence establishes this as a real place, not a symbol. Murphy, in his initial treatment, had intended for Jones to hail from Harlem. But it was Heyward who changed the opening scene to his own home turf of South Carolina, which gives Jones an "origin story" from a more isolated, close-knit rural community.¹⁰ (O'Neill gives Jones no specific place of origin at all.) Robeson scholar Jeffrey C. Stewart, in his audio commentary for the Criterion DVD, describes this introduction of Jones as befitting that of a "Black Adam," who, after leaving his own idyllic Eden, will now experience the world anew.

The presence of this rural, and clearly Southern, Baptist church in Jones' formation is so much more prominent in the film than in the play, that—in one of Murphy and Heyward's few interpolations into the body of O'Neill's play—it returns at the end as one of Jones' flashback "haunts" in the forest (or, as O'Neill has him say, "ha'nts") as he proceeds to regress into his personal past and that of his race. While O'Neill's haunts are all criminal, violent or humiliating episodes (like the chain gang and the slave auction), this brief recollection of the glories of Baptist jubilation just before Jones' final demise, gives the character's tragic descent a more complex palette, encompassing both the highs *and* lows of his past lives.

This addition is also one of many in the film to show off the singing of Paul Robeson. Aside from the foreboding monotonous "tom-toms," O'Neill's play calls for no music at all and his Jones never sings. Murphy's film, however, as Susan Delson argues, "is propelled by its music" (135). Even though Robeson did appear in the stage play, he never before exhibited his musical talents in the role.¹¹ The film, on the other hand, seems to have been conceived by its creators to make full use of Robeson's specific black body—both as a visually aesthetic and erotic object (he is bare-chested in many scenes) and as a musical instrument. Presumably in coordination with the film's composer J. Rosamond Johnson (a popular Harlem musician) and Robeson himself, Murphy interpolated a number of traditional Negro spirituals into key points of the film.¹² In the opening church scene, Robeson is accompanied by the famous Hall Johnson Choir, playing the role of the Baptist congregation.¹³ As spirituals dealing in the imagery of slavery, many of these songs (especially the opening "Now Let Me Fly," and, at the end, "Daniel") insert explicit texts of oppression and liberation into the film. Some were part of Robeson's regular concert repertoire (like the song sung in the chain gang scene, "Water Boy"), further indicating how much his very presence in the film entailed a kind of co-authorship.

African-American music also plays an integral role in the film's Harlem scenes, where Jones spends time during his layovers working the Pullman route. Filming in New York (at the Astoria Studios) Murphy could enlist many

noted Harlem musicians—including the athletic tapdancing of a 12-year-old Harold Nicholas—and recreated a Cotton Club-like nightclub on the Astoria soundstage to feature them in one extended scene.¹⁴ But far more striking is the rare glance the film offers of what Stewart's commentary identifies as a Harlem "buffet flat" party, where Jones is seen reveling in the apartment of "Marcella," played by popular Harlem lesbian comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley in short, slicked-back hair and a bulky pantsuit. The atmosphere clearly resembles historical descriptions of such prohibition-era affairs, which celebrated the neighborhood's diversity and liberated mores. As with the common "rent parties" of the era (ostensibly convened to help pay the host's rent) private apartments became veritable nightclubs with admission fees and often featuring famous musicians and entertainment. The "buffet flats" were known as more illicit debaucheries, as Eric Garber documents in an essay on "The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem":

Essentially private apartments where rooms could be rented by the night, buffet flats had sprung up during the late 1800s to provide overnight accommodations to black travelers refused service in white-owned hotels. By the 1920s, buffet flats developed a wilder reputation. Some were raucous establishments where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available. (Duberman 322)¹⁵

While not all these vices are on explicit display in the scene, their implication from the setting is typical of the "pre-Code" era of filmmaking to which *Emperor Jones* belongs. (The major studios didn't fully adopt the voluntary Hollywood "Production Code" governing depictions of sex, violence, and morals until 1934.) But Murphy's interest in going behind the closed doors of Harlem nightlife lies less in licentiousness than in jazz—the primary cinematic interest of his career. "The juke joint of *St. Louis Blues*," writes Delson, "and the chic nightclub and silhouetted spiritual singers of *Black and Tan* all reappear, in modified form, in *The Emperor Jones*"—nowhere more so than in the "buffet flat" scene, where the song "St. Louis Blues" specifically is sung at an upright piano by two party guests (136). We are no longer in the world of O'Neill's play but in that of Murphy's own jazz shorts of 1929; in his hands the *Emperor Jones* becomes for long stretches not just a Negro film, but specifically a Harlem Renaissance film and a jazz film. In addition to the persistent music and dancing, the almost exclusive blackness of these worlds is reinforced by the total absence of whites and by dialogue that reflects uniquely African-American concerns. Even the gratuitous "catfight" in the nightclub between Jones' competing mistresses is incited by one accusing the other of straightening her hair.

The Harlem scenes also serve to show how far the character of Brutus Jones has come—or fallen—since his humble rural and pious origins. The opening church scene sets up Jones as not just a decent man but almost a pillar of the community; the entire service turns out to be in his honor, sending him off on his great journey. While there may be a note of irony and anticlimax in the camera's revelation of his Pullman's cap as what all the fuss is about, Pullman jobs (as servile as they were) actually held high value at the time in African-American communities as rare opportunities for steady employment and class mobility; the congregation is not just wishing Jones well for himself, but sending him on what Stewart calls an "errand" for the community. That he never returns (except to briefly hide after escaping prison) nor shares his gains with his own people signals his moral degeneration perhaps even more than his descent into crime, violence, and abuse of power.

Murphy and Heyward thus take O'Neill's passing reference to Jones' Pullman service (probably meant to demean him and make his later emperorship even more unlikely) and expand it into a wealth of social meanings more specific to African Americans. And by taking Jones away from the Jim Crow South, the train also signifies the entire "Great Migration" of African Americans northward in the early twentieth century. "The train whistle of modernity," says Stewart, "takes him out of the agrarian community [. . .] from rural to urban, southern to northern, from medieval to modern America." Jones, he adds, "stands for all those negroes who are anxious to get out of the place which the American south of the early twentieth century has carved out for them—that of being second-class citizens." Again, by explicitly showing this moment only *implied* by the play, Murphy and Heyward illustrate that what fuels Jones' fierce ambition is more in line with the standard "American Dream" narrative than some irrational mania.

The Pullman episodes also give Heyward a chance to shape the story as an almost picaresque narrative, framing Jones' rise and fall as a kind of "rake's progress." This somewhat cynical edge emerges in Heyward's depiction of modern America as an already corrupted world that schools Jones in its ways. As Heyward himself acknowledged, "by throwing this character into contact with the disintegrating power of our white civilization, [I] broke Jones down from the rather simple Southern Negro to the shrewd, grafting Negro of the play. I rather enjoyed making him a black counterpart of our own big business pirate" (Lewin 60).¹⁶ This is most evident when Jones, having worked his way up to the "President's Car" on the Pullman, overhears a secretive insider trading deal and slyly blackmails the president into cutting him in on the profits in exchange for his silence. The tycoon's willingness to pacify Jones and subsequent demotion of him as punishment only reinforces that he is the more deprived of the two. In this parody of white, male "rags to riches" legends,

Heyward even saw Jones as "a black Horatio Alger figure" (Hutchisson xxxviii).¹⁷

When Jones is sent back south by the company (the Pullman president kicks him off the New York line), his desperation increases and he becomes a victim of circumstance. During a stop in Savannah, he encounters fellow porter Jeff in a rundown "juke joint" and the two square off in a tense craps game, leading to the fatal knife fight alluded to by O'Neill.¹⁸ Unlike in the play, though, Jeff (now jealous over the loss of his mistress to Jones) instigates the fight and Jones is shown acting in self defense. This excuse does Jones no good with the Georgia police and even the local blacks at the juke joint (indifferent to these two itinerant workers) abandon him and continue with their game as Jeff's dead body lies on the floor.

The film's depiction of Jones' subsequent imprisonment likewise makes a more subversive statement than O'Neill's mere mention of it. Even though the play provides the image of Jones' chain gang as a later "haunt," there he joins it only in mime. Murphy's camera dwells on the very tangible details of Jones' chains and enforced physical labor for a whole four minutes, during which the sight of Paul Robeson's mighty body in chains, singing spirituals and Negro work songs in a full defiant voice cannot help but recall images of slavery.¹⁹ Once again, Murphy and Heyward radicalize the mere sketch of a scene provided by O'Neill, who only has Jones relate: "I gits in 'nother argument wid de prison guard [. . .]. Maybe he hits me wid a whip and I splits his head wid a shovel" (1038). In the play's later reenactment of the chain gang "haunt," we see Jones kill the phantom guard in direct retaliation for abusing him personally. But in the film, Jones comes to the defense of *another* prisoner, collapsed in a sweatbox, whom the guard is whipping. This is the one altruistic act we see Jones perform in the film, and in revising the scene this way, Stewart argues, Heyward "inserts Jones into a tradition of black rebellion stretching back to Amistad [. . .] or Nat Turner's murder of slave-owning whites." Once again, the film gives outer social context to Jones' violence.

The episodic quality of Jones' brief adventures end up giving the character a variety of experiences that typify the rites of passage of the African-American male in early twentieth-century America. After his initial promise, high hopes, and support from his home community, he encounters only a series of dehumanizing jobs, mistreatment by the law, and betrayal by other blacks, who have already been hardened by racism and capitalism. Jones comes to a natural breaking point, then, when, after his prison escape, he takes on yet more demeaning labor as a stoker on a ship to get him out of the country. But rather than stay on the boat to its port of call (colonial Jamaica) he jumps ship at the sight of the first "nigger island" he sees (as he calls it) and swims to shore in search of freedom.

Once on the island, though, he is immediately arrested and forced to learn a whole new set of rules. This he does with great cunning and in collusion with the mercenary merchant Smithers, who actually “buys” him his freedom, even if it means marking him, once again, as a slave. In the play, we meet Smithers only after Jones’ subjugation of him. But the film develops their relationship much further to show two like-minded crooks who together swindle the local native ruler. Again, their shifty business practices satirize capitalism itself, showing Jones has learned his trade well. (It is only through his own initiative and backstabbing that he compels Smithers to make him a full and equal business partner.) As part of the pair’s island adventures, Murphy and Heyward get to dramatize O’Neill’s pivotal “silver bullet” episode whereby Jones wins the natives’ obedience by showing himself invincible to their gunshots. But unlike the play’s recounting—where Jones merely takes advantage of a missed shot and bluffs his enemies into not shooting again—in the film Jones has staged the whole charade much more cleverly, planting blanks in the guards’ guns in advance. This also makes the natives seem slightly less gullible, since Jones really does appear to survive their hail of bullets.

Finally, when Jones does assume power and dub himself “Emperor,” the film shows us just a little bit of him at the height of his power before O’Neill’s script takes over at the first moment of unraveling. The highly opulent spectacle Murphy stages for Jones holding court is at once a comical parody of royalty, but also—in its carnivalesque conceit of a court peopled entirely by former slaves—communicates images of black authority, power, and dignity rarely seen in films of the time. Even Jones himself is visibly impressed by the heights he has achieved, eyeing himself in his full regalia as he passes by the hall of mirrors he has erected. His nobles are announced by a liveried servant (played by the distinguished stage actor Rex Ingram) with such out-of-place titles as “Marquis and Marques of Newark,” and “Lord and Lady Baltimore”—a litany that, while comical, succeeds in elevating the everyday locations of African-American life to an almost utopian plane. (Cripps surmises that these courtiers “are named for the rail stops on Jones’ old run” [216].) The darker and more bitter ironies of O’Neill’s original story, though, soon take over this celebratory scene when Jones orders the execution of a group of chained, near-naked native prisoners brought in for sentencing. As was the focus of the play, the slave has become the slave master; but this image gains further poignancy from having seen Jones himself in chains not twenty minutes earlier.

At this point, two-thirds the way into the film, the screenplay finally turns itself over to O’Neill’s play (“already in progress,” as it were) with Smithers bringing news of the uprising against Jones. (The play indicates over-taxation as the cause, but the film audience might see it as justified retaliation for the just-witnessed execution, giving even the “ignorant bush niggers” of the island

more credible subjectivity than does the play.) From this point forward, Murphy and Heyward leave the play mostly intact; what prevented them from doing so entirely was Hollywood censorship. Once United Artists agreed to distribute this independently produced, New York-based film, the incipient Hayes office took an interest. Though not yet empowered by the 1934 Production Code, industry-appointed overseer Will Hayes could still threaten a film's distribution if his desired changes were not made. *The Emperor Jones* came up against many such demands—the most noticeable and damaging in terms of O'Neill's play being Jones' two slavery flashbacks in the forest. (Since Jones is supposed to use up all his bullets firing on his imaginary "haunts," attentive film viewers must be puzzled as to why Jones seems to run out of bullets before his stated six have been shown to be used.) In a film already brimming with violence committed on and by African-American males, visual representations of both a slave ship and a slave auction—O'Neill vividly describes them in scenes five and six of the play—were considered too potentially incendiary, especially when showing Jones shoot an auctioneer and a plantation owner. Murphy did film the scenes, but they were cut from the official print before the movie was even released and have now disappeared without a trace. Aside from disrupting plot continuity, their loss also robs the film of highly significant thematic value. As Stewart argues, the combination of these images from O'Neill with Heyward's additions to Jones' early life could have told a story of "trans-generational haunting," wherein the traumas of slavery and genocide continue to play out for their victims' descendants. Without explicitly reminding the audience of the historical context of slavery (which, after all, was not that distant from 1933—Robeson's father himself was born a slave), Heyward's catalogue of crimes in Jones' rough life could be mistaken for just another gangster picture.²⁰

The Hayes Office had plenty of problems with the first part of the picture as well. The light-skinned actress Fredi Washington (playing the invented character of Jeff's girlfriend Undine, who seduces Jones) was ordered to wear darker make-up to reassure the white audiences that no miscegenation was being portrayed. In the chain gang scene, the specific frames showing Jones' shovel knocking out and killing the prison guard were removed—leaving behind an odd jump cut that mars this powerful scene (perhaps the film's most subversive) even in the "restored" print of the film today. Even a shot of Smithers lighting Jones' cigarette was slated for cutting, but Murphy prevailed in keeping it.²¹

Another source of censorship and alteration of the film came not from Hollywood but ironically from the African-American communities and audiences for whom the film was targeted. Despite all of Murphy and Heyward's noble intentions, the film met with many accusations of racism and insensitivity among black critics—as it still does today. The main complaint at the time was

over the frequent utterance of the word “nigger” in the film, especially when spoken by black characters; in many cases it was from O’Neill’s script, but Heyward’s dialogue, in its attempt at an “authentic” black American idiom, employed it liberally as well. Richard Koszarski counts on the restored soundtrack “three dozen uses of the word ‘nigger,’ nearly all of them spoken by Robeson” (274). Most available prints of the film for the following six decades were the ones altered for urban markets and thus, for better or worse, bore no trace of this charged dialogue.

Perhaps memories of these early complaints have prevented *The Emperor Jones* from being more widely recognized as a significant African-American film, despite being made by white artists. One can only imagine how much further Murphy and Heyward—and indeed Robeson, who I argue should be considered a co-creator—could have taken their already progressive material had not Hollywood arbiters and censors meddled.²² Yet even as it stands, and despite continued debate amongst critics of all backgrounds, I maintain that, especially in retrospect, their film of *The Emperor Jones* remains a notable achievement in its depiction of African Americans in early sound film. Although Murphy maintained a reverence of O’Neill’s play, he had the insight to enlist such a socially conscious writer as Heyward to not so much revise or alter it, but rather creatively reinvent and recast it as a distinctly African-American—and not African Primitivist—story. These two artists’ respective fascinations with Harlem and the American South make for a rich tapestry of black life in the film rarely documented at the time in such widely released pictures. By carving out a legacy for itself that is both part of and separate from that of O’Neill’s play, the film at once preserves and magnifies its significance to the ongoing conversation about race in America, making *The Emperor Jones* forever a landmark title in that greater discourse.²³

NOTES

1. The Irish Repertory Theatre revival—directed by Ciarán O’Reilly and starring John Douglas Thompson—opened 18 October 2009 followed by a commercial transfer to the off-Broadway SoHo Playhouse on December 22. Its success was especially noteworthy for transcending the controversy surrounding the play with a credible and commanding performance by John Douglas Thompson as Jones. (See my review for *Time Out New York* 22–28 Oct. 2009.)

2. The play has encountered resistance in the academy as well. As Shannon Steen reported in 2000: “Although the play is widely anthologized, including in the recent *Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* [1994], there has been recent resistance to teaching the play. The desire to erase the play from the American classroom canon came to my

attention through a publication snafu—the first edition [1993] of the *HBJ Anthology of Drama*, edited by W. B. Worthen, included *The Emperor Jones* in its unit on American drama. However, when the anthology's publisher Harcourt Brace Jovanovich conducted research for the second edition [1996], it was discovered that many instructors would not teach the play, either because it was too overtly racist or because the play did not show O'Neill 'at his best.' Consequently, the publishers dropped the play from the second edition of the anthology" (343-344n).

3. *The Emperor Jones* was a film badly in need of restoration since its original length of 80 minutes was almost immediately cut down upon release by censors to 72 minutes. A complete restoration may never be possible, but the new version has restored over three minutes of previously lost material. See Saxena *et al* for an exhaustive account of the Library of Congress restoration process and the current condition of the film.

4. The film's co-producer John Krimsky later claimed that O'Neill had received more lucrative Hollywood offers for the play besides Murphy's, but that he declined when they insisted on casting white baritone Lawrence Tibbet, who had recently played Brutus Jones (in blackface) at the Metropolitan Opera in a 1933 adaptation by composer Louis Gruenberg (Krimsky 95).

5. O'Neill claimed his main inspiration for the premise of *The Emperor Jones* was the 1915 overthrow of Haitian President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, a US-supported strongman. His assassination was quickly avenged by President Woodrow Wilson, who ordered a Marine occupation of Haiti that ended up lasting 19 years (Delson 216n).

6. All quotations from the play *The Emperor Jones* are from Volume I of the Library of America edition of O'Neill's works: *Complete Plays 1913-1920*.

7. The film does not "catch up" with O'Neill's script until 51 minutes in, when Smithers enters Jones' bedroom after his court has abandoned him. This is already more than two pages (1033) into the play; Smithers' entrance and expository dialogue with the "Old Native Woman" (1031-1033) is cut from the screenplay. From that point forward, the final 25 minutes of the finished film are devoted to O'Neill's play more or less as written. It can be assumed, though, that the last section was approximately five minutes longer in the film's original version, before the slave auction and slave ship scenes were censored (which would have made the entire film run closer to 80 minutes).

8. Arguably, Murphy and Heyward added not one, but two acts. As Susan Delson relates, O'Neill himself was so impressed with the screenplay he told them, "If I had had what you have written, I would have had a fine three-act play" (128). Structurally, this is a useful way to read the film, with act 1 consisting of everything up until Brutus washes ashore on the island, act 2 covering his dealings with Smithers and his overthrow of the reigning "General," and act 3 devoted to the uprising against Jones as told by O'Neill.

9. When production on the film began in May 1933, Franklin Roosevelt had only been in office for two months and his New Deal programs had yet to be implemented.

10. The location is confirmed as South Carolina later in the film, when Jones' friend Jeff introduced him at a Harlem party as hailing from there.

11. While Robeson did not originate the role of Brutus Jones in the 1920 premiere,

he starred briefly in a Broadway mounting of the play in February 1925 and again in London later that summer.

12. “Johnson’s score,” according to Thomas Cripps, based on a later interview with producer John Krimsky, “divided the picture into four movements and motifs: African, to Gullah, to Harlem jazz, to Voodoo, a sure-handed attempt to symbolize a long race-memory” (216).

13. The Hall Johnson Choir also appeared in Murphy’s two 1929 jazz shorts, *Black and Tan* and *St. Louis Blues* (Delson 135).

14. As Jeffrey Stewart points out in his DVD commentary, the film’s nightclub differs from the Cotton Club in one crucial way—all the patrons are black, suggesting that Murphy’s model was one of Harlem’s many other nightclubs, less frequented by white “slummers.”

15. In 1938 the WPA’s “Writers Project” documented the rent-party and buffet-flat scene in interviews with Harlem residents, specifically identifying Pullman train porters “and other transients” as common attendees (Bascom 66). In the film, the porter Jeff brings Jones to Marcella’s with the money they make from tips on the train. “This is my New York home,” he tells Jones, “and you’ll always find me here.”

16. Though sympathetic to the character, Heyward’s limiting dichotomy of the Negro being either “simple” or “grafting” betrays the ultimately paternalistic stance he often took toward his subjects.

17. Hutchisson argues that in the context of Heyward’s other writings of the time—including an aborted proletarian novel—*Emperor Jones* “is most interesting as a continuation of his increasingly ironic, critical, and even jaundiced view of whites” (xxxvii).

18. In another appearance in the film of notable African-American stage talent from the era, Jeff is played by Frank Wilson, the original Porgy of Heyward’s play.

19. The brutality of chain gangs was an increasingly prominent cause of civil rights activists in the 1920s and ‘30s, leading to many charges of “cruel and unusual punishment” disproportionately on black convicts in southern prisons. Another southern playwright of the era interested in black subjects, Paul Green, made a mark with his protest play against chain gangs, *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, produced by the Federal Theatre Project in 1936.

20. Stewart likens the screenplay’s plotting to that of the famous Edward G. Robinson gangster film *Little Caesar* (1931)—a title perhaps tellingly similar to *The Emperor Jones* in its diminutive invocation of an imperial title by an unsuited man.

21. Both MacQueen and Saxena trace the various cuts and changes in more detail.

22. Further interference may have come from producer William C. DeMille (brother of Cecil) who is billed in the credits as a “supervisor.” DeMille later claimed he fired Murphy and took over the final shooting and editing of the film himself. Delson finds little evidence beyond DeMille’s boasting, but his presence on the set is a fact (138-139).

23. This essay was originally written for a Fall 2007 seminar taught by Professor Michele Wallace at the CUNY Graduate Center on “Race Gender and Performance in US Cinema, 1895-1930s.” My thanks to Professor Wallace for her encouragement on this topic.

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