

BLACK FILM INSTITUTE 1976 ~ 1986

A Decade of Growth,
Diversity and Service

W

hen film historian Donald Bogle walked onto the stage of the Electric Playhouse at Federal City College (a predecessor of the University of the District of Columbia) on October 21, 1976, he helped inaugurate what has become one of the most innovative film and lecture programs in the Washington metropolitan area, perhaps in the nation.

Over the last ten years, UDC's Black Film Institute has given Washington audiences the opportunity to see the newest, the favorites, the obscure, and the classics among black and third world cinema. From popular American releases such as Richard Pryor's *Bustin' Loose* to lesser-known works such as *Xala*, Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembane's cutting satire of modern Africa, the Black Film Institute has been consistent in its commitment to providing cinematic glimpses into the lives of black and third world people throughout the world.

As it begins its tenth year, the BFI, through its popular film and lecture series, young filmmakers' workshop, and other programs, continues to provide much-needed exposure for a body of cinema that too often remains unseen and unappreciated.

The Beginning

The Black Film Institute is the brainchild of Dr. Tony Gittens, its founder and director since its inception. Gittens, employed in Federal City College's development office, grew bored with helping faculty members secure grants and decided to try his luck in getting his own idea funded. It was an idea based on the premise that there was an audience in the nation's capital for a film and lecture series that featured black and third world films.

Explains Gittens, "Black film is an important, but often overlooked, segment of the history of the American

cinema. I wanted to create a place for exploring the history, meaning, and potential of black cinema, and I wanted this work to be both educational and entertaining. I also wanted to focus on film exhibition, as opposed to production and distribution. There was a need for more theatres screening and encouraging public discussion of all types of black movies."

After anxious hours spent waiting to see if anyone at the National Endowment for the Arts thought that his idea was as good as he did, Gittens received word that he had been awarded \$17,500 from NEA's Expansion Arts and Media Arts programs to support a film and lecture series to be produced by a then-unheard of entity called the Black Film Institute. The terms of the grant also called for the fledgling institute to conduct programs for special audiences such as senior citizens, children, and residents of correctional institutions. Since then, the NEA has made annual awards to the BFI.

In addition to inaugural speaker Donald Bogle, other guests during the BFI's first series included film historian Pearl Bowser, who discussed two films by early black independent filmmakers, *Scar of Shame* and *Spying the Spy*; noted Caribbean author and scholar C.L.R. James; and author and social critic Clayton Riley. Programs in that series focused on topics ranging from "A Tribute to Paul Robeson" to "What is a Black Film?" The series also included a festival of black films for young children featuring educator and children's film critic Daphne Muse.

The BFI devoted a significant portion of its first year to the works of African and independent black filmmakers, a practice that it would continue to follow in subsequent year. *Sambizanga*, a 1972 release by Sarah Maldoror, one of Africa's major women filmmakers, and *Passing Through*, a film by black independent filmmaker Larry Clark that had its Washington, D.C., premiere at a BFI screening, exemplified the institute's efforts to bring Washington audiences films that were largely inaccessible through commercial movie theaters.

"The struggle to improve black participation both in front of and behind the movie camera has been an ongoing process of blacks protesting demeaning images presented in Hollywood films, coupled with a long history of black filmmakers successfully producing their own works," says Gittens.

By the end of its first year, the BFI had played host to guest speakers including performers Robert Hooks and Butterfly McQueen, and screened films ranging from *Stormy Weather*, featuring a youthful Lena Horne, to *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, a graphic documentary about apartheid in South Africa.

Emerging Recognition

By 1978, the Black Film Institute had become a recognized entity in Washington area film circles. Its scope had expanded to include screenings in area nightclubs such as the Foxtrappe and the Clubhouse, and news of its activities was carried on the front page of *The Washington Post's* "Style" section and in film industry trade publications such as *Boxoffice* magazine.



Actress Ruby Dee was a BFI guest in 1976.

During this period, the BFI also began what was to become a long history of collaborative ventures with other area cultural and educational organizations. In February 1978, the BFI convened a Black Independent Filmmakers Workshop as part of that year's Washington Film Festival. Sponsored by the Washington Area Filmmakers League, the festival was held at the American Film Institute Theater in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, the veteran husband-and-wife acting team were the featured participants and discussed their attempts to extend their success as actors to their recent new endeavors in independent film production.

In October 1978, the Black Film Institute hosted the first of several visits from the multi-talented Gordon Parks. Parks, who first achieved recognition as a member of *Life* magazine's highly respected staff of photojournalists, is the director of several feature films including the autobiographical *The Learning Tree*; *Shaft*, the story of hard-hitting, tough-talking black detective John Shaft; and *Leadbelly*, his hauntingly beautiful film about blues legend Huddie Ledbetter. Parks' appearance at the BFI, accompanied by a screening of *Leadbelly*, was sponsored by a grant from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

International Involvement

By the end of the 1970's, the Black Film Institute's simple typewritten schedules had given way to slick, two-color brochures with photographs. The list of guest speakers had swelled to include the likes of playwright and author Amiri Baraka; District of Columbia Delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives Walter Fauntroy; and actor, playwright, and director Melvin Van Peebles.

In February 1979, the Black Film Institute's Director Tony Gittens visited several West African, Caribbean, and South American countries under the auspices of the U.S. State Department's International Communication Agency.

The trip included a visit to the Sixth Pan African Film Festival (FESPACO) in Ouagadougou, Upper Volta. Along with the Carthage (Tunisia) Film Festival, FESPACO is the second international festival devoted to African films, and is fast becoming a key meeting place for filmmakers to discuss, debate, and analyze the problems confronting African cinema. Dr. Gittens' participation in the festival and the 12 films by independent black American filmmakers he screened marked the first time that works by black Americans has been included in the event.

"In the past decade, I have observed that some of the freshest and most exciting approaches to cinema have come from nations in Africa, South America, and the Caribbean," states Gittens. "The BFI always receives enthusiastic audience response when we screen films from these parts of the world."

"After-Thoughts at Upper Volta," an article in the March 21, 1979 issue of *Variety* noted "Festival Director Louis Thiombiano . . . was especially proud of the fact that for the first time a selection of films by African-American filmmakers . . . had been presented at the suggestion of Dr. Anthony Gittens . . . who accompanied and presented the package."

Intensified Focus

In 1980, the Black Film Institute initiated film and lecture programs built around a central theme. Among the topics explored were black women, black arts, and international films.

Donald Bogle payed a return visit to the BFI to kick off the series on black women. He offered commentary based on his book *Brown Sugar: 80 Years of America's Black Female Superstars*, followed by a screening of excerpts from *Carmen Jones* featuring Dorothy Dandridge, and *Black and Tan Fantasy*, a 1929 short featuring Fredi Washington and Duke Ellington.

A highlight of the series was the world premiere of . . . *but then, she's Betty Carter*, a film by independent black filmmaker Michelle Parkerson that offers a rare personal look into the life of the incomparable jazz vocalist. The premiere was held in the chambers of the District of Columbia City Council and was followed by a reception hosted by D.C. Mayor and Mrs. Marion Barry, Jr.

During the coming years, the institute would continue to benefit from the mayor's interest in the arts and his efforts to promote the cultural diversity of the nation's capital. On February 24, 1982, he proclaimed "James Van Der Zee Day" in honor of the great Harlem photographer's achievements in chronicling black American life during a career that began at the turn of the century. That evening, Van Der Zee and his wife were special guests at a BFI screening of *I Remember Harlem: 1930 - 1940*, a segment from William Miles' landmark film series. Following the screening, Effi Barry, wife of the mayor, presented the mayoral proclamation to Van Der Zee.

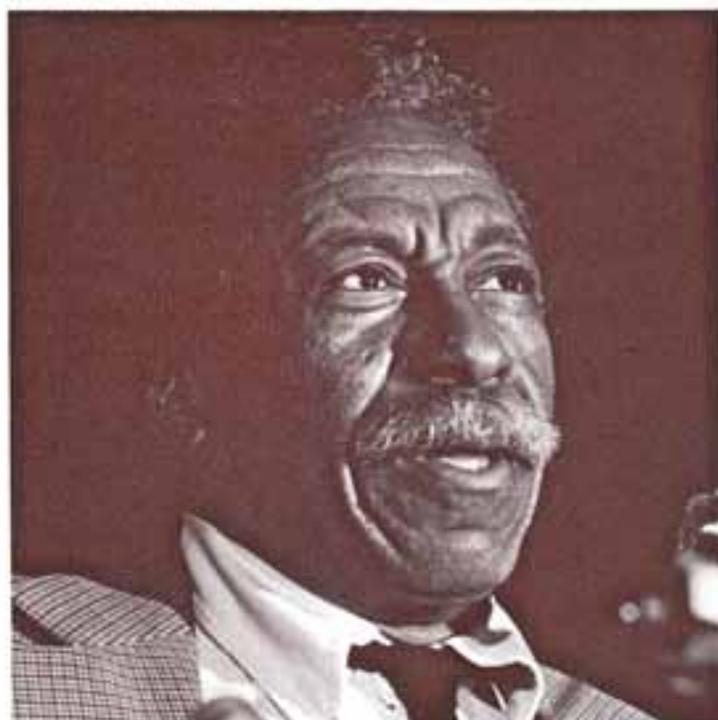
The institute also continued its efforts to spotlight the work of independent black filmmakers, returning to the AFI Theater as co-host of the Washington, D.C., premiere of *Clarence and Angel*, Robert Gardner's award-winning film about the friendship between two boys. The screening kicked off "Black on Black," a national tour of films by independent black filmmakers. The program, which would be screened in its entirety by the BFI a year later, was mounted by the St. Louis Museum of Art, with support from the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities.

Ntozake Shange, poet, playwright, and author of the award-winning play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, joined the list of artists who shared the BFI's stage, appearing in early 1982.

Although it had demonstrated a sensitivity to the political climate in African and third world nations early in its development, in April 1982, the BFI joined with Howard University's African Studies Department Outreach Program to present *Images of Resistance*, a four-part film and lecture series focusing on Southern Africa. Theo-Ben Guirab, SWAPO permanent observer to the United Nations and member of the SWAPA Central Committee, and Barbara Masekela, chairperson of the regional political committee of the African National Congress, were among the guest speakers for this series.

The Washington premieres of two films produced by African filmmakers led off the BFI's fall 1983 series, *Cinema Africa. The Wind*, a 1981 release from the West African nation of Mali opened the series, followed by *Wend Kuuni*, a film by Gaston Kabore, director of the National Center of Cinema in Upper Volta. All of the films in the five-part series were written or directed by African filmmakers and screenwriters.

Photographer-filmmaker Gordon Parks has had several works screened at the BFI.





Dr. Tony Gittens is the founder and director of the Black Film Institute.

Effi Barry and son Christopher were among the BFI guests who saluted Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee



Melvin Van Peebles and Ossie Davis returned to the Black Film Institute in the spring of 1984 as part of *What's Happening in Black Film*, a five-part series that offered a potpourri of programs ranging from "Politics and Film" to "The All-Black Musical," which featured Davis as guest speaker.

Diversity and Service

In 1984 and 1985, the BFI joined forces with the District of Columbia Public Library's Audiovisual Division to present special Black History Month programs. "Issues in Black Creative Expressions," presented in 1984, featured films ranging from *Wild Style*, about New York's South Bronx, to *Say Amen, Somebody*, the stirring musical documentary that tells the story of gospel music in America. "Images of Work," the 1985 series, used film and video as a springboard to discuss the crucial and often unique role that the black worker has played in the development of the American workplace. *Solomon Northrop's Odyssey*, Gordon Parks' powerful film based on the true story of a free black man kidnapped from New York in 1841 and subjugated to 12 years of slavery in Louisiana, began the series. Parks was present to answer questions about the film, which was produced in 1984 for the Public Broadcasting System. The programs were supported by grants from the D. C. Community Humanities Council.

"Film and Culture," presented in spring 1985, featured a diverse group of films from developing nations including Argentina, Martinique, India, Senegal, South Africa, and Mexico

"Black Music on Film" ran from mid-June to mid-July of 1985 and featured a rare screening of *Princess Tam Tam*, a

1935 French-language release featuring the legendary Josephine Baker in the title role. Other films in the series, which drew enthusiastic public response, surveyed a variety of aspects of black music in America -- from the contemporary pop scene of *Sparkle* to classic jazz footage spotlighting Billie Holiday and John Coltrane.

Over the last decade, the Black Film Institute has gained a national reputation for producing innovative and creative programming. It has continued to provide audiences with access to footage that is among the richest and most diverse collection of cinematic images ever produced.

Reflecting on the institute's growth and development, BFI founder and director Tony Gittens says: "While working as a social activist in the 1960's, I noticed that many projects with worthy intentions were only able to maintain themselves for a short period of time. I came to understand the importance of institutionalizing alternative activities so that they eventually become a permanent part of the social fabric. Therefore, in establishing the BFI, I sought to incorporate it into an already-existing institution."

"Perhaps the most significant factor in the institute's continued existence has been the support it has received from the University of the District of Columbia and its Learning Resources Division. I've seen programs like ours come and then quickly disappear. Even with the tremendous support we've received from national and local funding sources, it if wasn't for the university, we wouldn't be here today."

A · Celebration · of · Black · Film

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January

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Lena Horne's beauty brought her a wide film audience.

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September

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The Realization of a Negro's Ambition was an early all-black film.

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Cab Calloway performed "The Jumpin' Jive" in 1943's *Stormy Weather*.

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The black western 1938: *Harlem on the Prairie*.

October

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June



WITH ALICE B. RUSSELL
 CARMAN NEWSOME, JACQUELINE LEWIS
 ALEC LOVEJOY, ETHEL MOSES, GLORIA PRESS
 DISTRIBUTED BY
 MICHEAUX PICTURES CORPORATION
 NEW YORK, N.Y.

God's Step Children was a 1938 release from filmmaker Oscar Micheaux.

March

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Sugar Cane Alley from Martinique presents life from the perspective of a young boy.

November

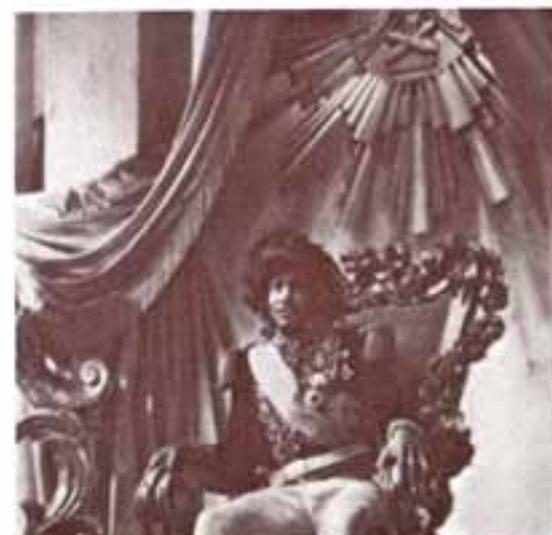
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The black western 1971: *Buck and the Preacher* with Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee.

July

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Josephine Baker's blend of sleekness and sophistication was captured in a number of films of the thirties.

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Fredi Washington was the anxious heroine of *One Mile From Heaven*.

August

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One of Paul Robeson's memorable roles was *The Emperor Jones*.

December

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Learning Resources Division
 University of the District of Columbia
 800 Mount Vernon Place, NW
 Washington, DC 20001 (202) 727-2396