

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
April 1997

Contact: Graham Leggat
212/708-9752

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS TWO EXHIBITIONS EXPLORING EARLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA

**Gallery Exhibition Displays Posters, Lobby Cards, and Pressbooks
Originally Created to Promote African-American Films**

Film Series Surveys Nineteen "Race Films," Made with "All-Colored Casts"

Brought to Light: Black Cinema, 1921-1959
Selections from
the James E. Wheeler Collection
May 1-July 8, 1997
The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1 Lobby

Within Our Gates:
American Race Films, 1918-1949
May 1-6, 1997
(reprised June 24-July 8, 1997)
The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1

"Race films"—films featuring "all-colored casts," made by independent companies, producers, and directors, both black and white—were shown from the late 1910s through the 1950s in the de jure segregated theaters in the South and the de facto segregated theaters in the North. Made originally for African-American audiences, these productions constitute one of the richest, most cohesive, and longest-lived independent film movements in American cinema. Beginning May 1, The Museum of Modern Art will present two exhibitions exploring this rich cultural legacy: *Brought to Light: Black Cinema, 1921-1959*, a selection of posters, lobby cards, and pressbooks that will be on display through July 8 in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1 Lobby; and *Within Our Gates: American Race Films, 1918-1949*, a film series that will run through May 6 and be reprised from June 24 to July 8.

-more-

Brought to Light: Black Cinema, 1921–1959 showcases forty-two posters and forty-four lobby cards, pressbooks, and heralds selected from the comprehensive private collection of James E. Wheeler, founder and director of Concept East II, Detroit—a nonprofit organization devoted to the promotion, preservation, and presentation of African-American literary, performing, visual, and media arts.

Then, as now, promotional materials were designed around the most recognizable and bankable leading performers of the day, including Evelyn Preer, Paul Robeson, and Anita Bush—and, in later years, Ralph Cooper, Herb Jeffries, Lena Horne, and Dorothy Dandridge, who became known for their work in mainstream Hollywood films. The exhibition includes posters for musicals, mysteries, melodramas, and Westerns, and for films by important black producers and directors such as Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams, Ralph Cooper, and William D. Alexander. Also included are materials for studio films, such as *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), and *Porgy and Bess* (1959), that featured “all-Negro casts” and were marketed to both African-American and white audiences.

“Even though these posters were created to resemble as closely as possible their mainstream Hollywood counterparts—using the same rich colors, bold graphics, and striking design—they nonetheless clearly reflect the attitudes and interests of African-American culture during this period,” says Mary Corliss, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Video, who organized the exhibition in collaboration with Wheeler.

Within Our Gates: American Race Films, 1918–1949, which takes its name from a 1920 film by Micheaux, is a survey of nineteen works selected by Wheeler and drawn from the Library of Congress, the American Film Institute Collection, The Circulating Film and Video Library of The Museum of Modern Art, and the James E. Wheeler Collection.

Though the budgets for these films were minuscule, they came to resemble by the 1930s the standard Hollywood genres: musicals (*Hi-De-Ho*, 1947), crime stories (*Double Deal*, 1939, and *Dark Manhattan*, 1937), Westerns (*Two Gun Man from Harlem*, 1938), comedies (*Boy! What a Girl!*, 1945, and *Beware*, 1946), family dramas (*Broken Strings*, 1940), and religious melodramas (*Blood of Jesus*, 1941).

“The exhibition and film series complement and illuminate each other,” says Wheeler, who founded Concept East II in 1986. “Together they dispel the myth that African-Americans did not contribute to the creative, innovative, and productive processes in the development of the American motion-picture industry, proving that their presence is an identifiable force and a vital part of American culture.”

It is estimated that the number of segregated theaters on the black theater circuit in the South, Southwest, and large cities of the North had grown to nearly 700 by the end of the 1940s—at least 100 of which were owned and operated by African-Americans—and that nearly 400 features were produced by the movement’s end in the 1950s (though many of these films have been lost). These films, which often presented a separate black world that paralleled the white one, offered what Hollywood did not: unlimited roles for African-Americans, both behind and in front of the camera.

“You can hardly imagine a cinema that is more American than ‘race films,’” says Laurence Kardish, Curator, Department of Film and Video, who organized the film series for the Museum. “With an invention born of the most meager means and an incandescence of spirit, the films present worlds where class, not color, is the issue and the maverick tends to succeed.”

As outlets for the talents and creative visions of black producers, directors, writers, and technicians as well as actors and performers, these films depict the largely unheralded attitudes,

aspirations, fantasies, and obsessions of African-Americans during the first half of this century, providing, especially in the silent era, a contrast to the stereotypes promoted by Hollywood.

Within Our Gates: American Race Films, 1918-1949 and *Brought to Light: Black Cinema, 1921-1959* are made possible by generous grants from Philip Morris Companies Inc. and Time Warner Inc.

###

**You are cordially invited to attend press screenings for
Within Our Gates: American Race Films, 1918-1949
Monday, April 21 & Tuesday, April 22
The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2, The Museum of Modern Art**

Monday, April 21

11:00 *Within Our Gates*. 1920. USA. Written, produced, and directed by Oscar Micheaux. With Evelyn Preer, Flo Clements, James D. Ruffin. Silent. Micheaux's earliest extant film, about racial prejudice in the South, attempted rape, and lynch justice. App. 70 min.

12:15 *Moon Over Harlem*. 1939. USA. Edgar G. Ulmer. With Bud Harris, Cora Green, Mercedes Gilbert. A melodrama about pushcart peddlers in Harlem and a mother who believes her daughter is trying to seduce her stepfather. 68 min.

Tuesday, April 22

11:00 *Blood of Jesus*. 1941. USA. Written, produced, and directed by Spencer Williams. With Williams, Cathryn Caviness, Juanita Riley. A religious drama about faith in Jesus and His remarkable healing power. 56 min.

12:00 *Miracle in Harlem*. 1948. USA. Jack Kemp. With Sheila Guyse, William Greaves, Stepin Fetchit. One of the last "race films" and one of the most accomplished; about the swindling of a small business in Harlem. 70 min.

Please RSVP to Graham Leggat at 212/708-9752.

No. 27

For more information, photographs from the films, or slides of the paper materials, please contact Graham Leggat at 212/708-9752. Visit the Museum Web site at www.moma.org.