

Oscar Devereaux Micheaux: The first African-American film director

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Abstract

In a time when racism was running rampant in America, the 1920s and 1930s, a young boy named Oscar Devereaux Micheaux had a vision for a better future for him and his family. He was born in the south and one day seized the opportunity to flee the oppressive South. He had dreams of a better world. He often escaped his world of prejudice, riots and lynching by using a peaceful pencil and a world-changing writing pad. This daring author/filmmaker would eventually make an inevitable mark in history. His first book later became his first film. He used the arts to escape and create with the hope of changing the community, becoming a Pullman Porter helped him fund his illustrious future in an otherwise overcast, black and white world.

"One of the greatest task of my life has been to teach the colored man he can be anything." This is a quote from Oscar Devereaux Micheaux, the first black to make films. Micheaux is called the father of African American film and is credited with his first novel was called *The Homesteader*, based on his first novel. An independent film producer, Micheaux, at a time when movie producers wanted to make a film from a book series, decided that he wanted to direct it himself. Oscar Micheaux is an example of a pioneer, an inspiring figure who proved to the world that no matter what life situation a person encounters, one individual can make a significant difference in shaping our ever-changing and challenging world.

Oscar Micheaux produced and directed feature films with all black characters and made them specifically for all black audiences. In the entertainment industry he was known as "a rough Negro who got his hand on some cash." He was famous for what was termed as "race movies." He produced 34 films over a 30-year period, from 1919 to 1948, according to so as the first black man to make film, he was also the first to tackle taboo subjects. For example, back then he took on the issue of interracial Romance in his movies. He felt that there was a need for re-education. A reoccurring theme in his movies was that of interracial relations such as a white woman in a relationship with a black man. However a turning point in the film would come when it was discovered that the "white" woman was actually a mixed-race woman. As the saying went at the time, if you had one drop of black blood in you, you were considered black. This twist in his film would make the relationship between blacks and whites plausible. However, some movie goers were angered by inferences in his movies that somehow inferred that the lighter skinned African-American people we're more acceptable then darker skin ones.

Micheaux at one time earned \$40,000 in one year from making films and writing. His 1921 film *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Micheaux was quoted as saying “I’m helping elevate.” He had a talent for penny-pinching. According to Jamie Walker.Org, Micheaux's career spanned 30 years and included more than 40 motion pictures. He was born in 1884 and died in 1951. An African American filmmaker, a young woman named Jamie Walker, is a Sundance Film winner who was awarded the prize after making a short film entitled, *The Young Oscar Micheaux*. In her film she portrays Micheaux as the son of a former slave whose family relocated to Great Bend Kansas from a farm in the south. He actually witnessed a lynching as a young teenager which hastened his desire to get out of the south. He followed in the footsteps of his uncle who was a wealthy Pullman porter. Micheaux also became a porter. According to Walker, Micheaux was also a freelance writer, journalist and a true homesteader.

Born January 2, 1884, in or near Metropolis, Ill., Micheaux moved to Chicago when he was just 17 years old. He became employed as a Pullman porter before moving to South Dakota to farm and write. He married to an African-American from Chicago, however, the couple later divorced, according to the Biography.com website. Micheaux’s experiences served as the subject matter for his film, *The Homesteader*, based on his first novel, *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*. Considered an autobiographical novel, he self-published that book in 1913.

The big screen version of the novel was produced in 1919, and was the first full-length feature produced by an African American filmmaker. Micheaux, an occasionally controversial innovator, continued to create films for the next three decades until he pass away on March 25, 1951, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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