

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

SOUTH AFRICAN CINEMA IN THE 1950S



Zonk!

Curated by Peter Davis

In 1948, the Nationalist Party, the party of white supremacy, came to power in South Africa. During the next decade, it passed numerous laws that cemented apartheid as an institution. The primary aim of these laws was complete separation of the races in virtually all areas of life — housing, work, education, sex, sport, entertainment.

Paradoxically, this period began as one of great optimism for black South Africans. Racism in the form of Nazism had been destroyed, the United Nations had just been established on the basis of the equality of races and the freedom of all peoples. During the Second World War, blacks had made unprecedented advances in South African society, and the African National Congress was beginning its great campaigns for human rights.

During the early 1950s, for the first time a number of feature films were made with blacks playing the leading roles. These films revealed and exploited the rich pool of talent that flourished in the black townships surrounding Johannesburg. B-movies, they were enormously popular with a black population starved of positive images of Africans. In contrast to these happy-go-lucky films, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) looked at the degradation of African life, and, at the end of the decade, *Come Back, Africa* (1959) came as a devastating indictment of apartheid.

— Peter Davis

Vancouver-based filmmaker **Peter Davis** works chiefly in social and political documentary. During the apartheid period, he produced about 10 documentaries on South Africa, including a two-part history of film during the apartheid era, titled *In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid*. He has also written a book on the same subject.

Program notes by Peter Davis

African Jim

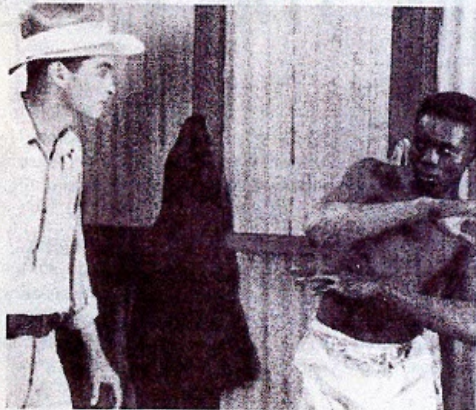
South Africa 1949. Director: Donald Swanson
Cast: Daniel Adnewman, Dolly Rathebe, Dan Twala, Sam Maile

Dolly & The Inkspots

South Africa 1994. Director: Jurgen Schadeberg
With: Dolly Rathebe & The Inkspots

In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid [Excerpt]

Canada/USA 1994. Directors: Peter Davis, Daniel Risenfeld



Scottish actor Eric Rutherford, en route to South Africa in 1947, bumped into Orson Welles in Harry's Bar in Florence. In the course of conversation, Rutherford said to Welles, "Why don't you make a film about Africa?" To which Welles replied, "Why don't you make a film about Africa?" — which led to *African Jim*, produced by Rutherford (his first and only feature) and directed by Donald

PROGRAM 1

Swanson. The film is a simple story about a lad from the country who comes to Johannesburg looking for work, has a number of misadventures, and then is discovered as a singing talent. Its importance as a historical document is in Rutherford's breaking of the colour bar in South African cinema, and in its showcasing of black performers, foremost among whom was Dolly Rathebe. Dolly's career is traced in *Dolly & The Inkspots*, which shows how, during the 1950s and 60s, Dolly became the toast of the townships and, together with The African Inkspots, a pioneer of township jazz. Dolly is still singing, and at the recent celebration in her honour at Jo'burg's Civic Centre, thrown by Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, Nelson Mandela made her a gift of a car. The two films are preceded by an introductory clip about the making of *African Jim* from Peter Davis's documentary on filmmaking in apartheid South Africa, *In Darkest Hollywood*. Video: 50 mins. (*African Jim*) + 28 mins. (*Dolly*) + 23 mins. (*Darkest Hollywood excerpt*).
Thursday, February 7 - 7:30 pm

Zonk!

South Africa 1950. Director: Hymie Kirstein
Cast: Sylvester Phahlane, Daniel Lekoape, Timothy Zwane, Fiver Kelly, The Manhattan Stars, Sam Maile

Song of Africa

South Africa 1951. Director: Emil Nofal
Cast: Joseph Muso, Maybel, George Mabuza

Impressed by the success of *African Jim* made by outsider Eric Rutherford, African Films, which held a near-monopoly on production and distribution in South Africa, for the first time undertook a couple of films about and for Africans. With the kind of production values that Rutherford could not afford, *Zonk!* And *Song of Africa* confirmed the rich seam of talent - much of it heavily influenced by black American performers — that was available. Video: 56 mins. (*Zonk!*) + 56 mins. (*Song*).
Thursday, February 7 - 9:35 pm

PROGRAM 2

Cry, the Beloved Country

South Africa/Great Britain 1951. Director: Zoltan Korda
Cast: with Canada Lee, Sidney Poitier, Charles Carson, Joyce Carey, Lionel Ngakane

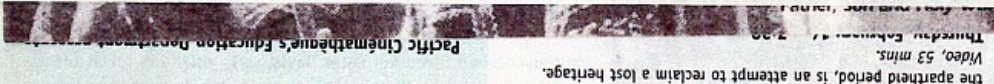


Alan Paton's Beloved Country

South Africa 1993. Director: Catherine Meyburgh

Alan Paton himself adapted the 1951 version of his classic novel of race relations in South Africa, made in conjunction with Zoltan Korda, of the famous Hungarian-British Korda filmmaking dynasty. The film received worldwide acclaim, but although it established Sidney Poitier as a leading actor, it had poor distribution in the United States — possibly because it featured the blacklisted American actor Canada Lee, in his finest role. *Alan Paton's Beloved Country* is a moving biography of the South African writer who spent a lifetime fighting against racism, as an active politician as

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the apartheid period, is an attempt to reclaim a lost heritage.
Video, 53 mins.

Monday, February 11 - 7:30 pm

mins. (*Cry*) + 54 mins. (*Paton*).
well as a writer, but who died a deeply disappointed man. 100

Travelogue: Holiday in South Africa (1952)

This American travelogue shows the good life as led by whites in South Africa, with no hint of any racial tensions — indeed, with not many pictures of blacks. It is typical of how the West viewed South Africa at that time. *Video, 13 mins.*

plus

The Condemned Are Happy

South Africa 1958. Director: Jamie Uys

Jamie Uys, who later was to make the enormously successful *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, early in his career made this film for the South African government. An early version of the theme of black migration to which Uys would revisit often, it is an apologia for the apartheid policy of forced removals that uprooted millions of Africans from their homes. *Video, 28 mins.*

plus

Freedom Square & Back of the Moon

South Africa 1987. Directors: William Kentridge, Angus Gibson



By the 1950s, the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown had developed into a community where cultures from all over southern Africa blended into a vibrant mosaic. It was the leading centre of the artistic and intellectual life of black South Africa. Its uniqueness stemmed to a large degree from the fact that it was one of the few places in white towns where Africans could own land, and so put down roots. This was intolerable to white nationalists, who considered it a "black spot" that had to be wiped out. Sophiatown was destroyed, its people forcibly removed into new soulless black townships, its rich culture stifled. This documentary, made during



In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid [Excerpt]

Canada/USA 1994. Directors: Peter Davis, Daniel Riesenfeld

With *Come Back, Africa*, American producer-director Lionel Rogosin made a hard-hitting docudrama that would become one of the most forceful tools in the anti-apartheid struggle for the next 30 years. The maverick New Yorker was the first white to involve black Africans in developing a film script, and the result was a devastating look at South Africa's pass system, which controlled where a black man could live and work, and deprived him of human dignity. The film was widely acclaimed outside South Africa, and in retaliation, the South African government accused Rogosin of being a Communist. America's own race relations at that time were not so far removed from South Africa, and because of this, and because distribution in the United States was not friendly to independents, Rogosin could not find a distributor in his own country. So he solved that problem by buying the Bleeker Street Theatre in New York, where he ran *Come Back, Africa*, and which he opened to independents like himself for several years. Apart from its anti-apartheid message, *Come Back, Africa* is virtually the only record of life in Sophiatown during its heyday. It gave a voice to African intellectuals like Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, and Lewis Nkosi, and showed for the first time on-screen the dynamic figure of Miriam Makeba. With the passing of apartheid, it has lost none of its power. The film is preceded by a clip about *Come Back, Africa* from Peter Davis's documentary *In Darkest Hollywood*. *Video: 81 mins. (Come Back, Africa) + 13 mins. (Darkest Hollywood excerpt).*
Thursday, February 14 – 9:00 pm

Song of Africa

