

Chadwick Boseman (1976–2020): A talented actor, now hailed as a “king”

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On August 28, Chadwick Boseman, star of such films as *Get On Up*, *42*, *Marshall*, *Da 5 Bloods*, and others, died after a four-year battle with colon cancer. He was 43 years old.

The news of his death came as a shock to his fans, who had every reason to expect to continue seeing him for years to come. Boseman had not publicly disclosed his illness, and several of his recent films, including *Marshall*, *Da 5 Bloods* and the forthcoming *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (based on an August Wilson play), were completed while he was undergoing treatments and surgeries for the disease.

His death is a tragedy, both for his being stricken with such a terrible disease at a young age and for the loss of his remarkable talent. He was outstanding in several of his roles, particularly those where he was tasked with bringing to life figures from the 20th century: baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson (*42*), legendary singer James Brown (*Get On Up*) and civil rights lawyer and future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall (*Marshall*). At his best, Boseman had a talent for capturing something of the essence of historical figures without resorting to superficial imitations, and he could imbue his characters with an inner fire of conviction and purpose.

Of course, he also performed in a number of brainless and mediocre works as well, such as the cartoonish fantasy *Gods of Egypt* and the violent police thriller *21 Bridges*. The low point of his career was the miserable *Black Panther*, a militarist, pro-CIA comic book superhero film steeped in racial politics.

The expressions of sadness from admirers and the public at large have been accompanied by a deluge of exaggerated tributes from the media and numerous figures in the financial-political elite. Democratic Party politicians such as former president Barack Obama and presidential and vice presidential candidates Joe Biden and Kamala Harris released statements praising Boseman, as did wealthy media moguls Bob Iger and Oprah Winfrey. Obituaries referred to his death as “devastating” and “unbelievable” (*Variety*) and painted his loss as a major blow for the black population as a whole.

On the Sunday following the news of his death, ABC television aired a showing of *Black Panther* without advertisements (what a sacrifice!) followed by a special program titled *Chadwick Boseman—A Tribute for a King*, in which Boseman was raised to near-mythic status and praised as an “icon” and a “generation-defining actor.” Invariably, the media commentary has sidelined his better work in order to hold up *Black Panther*, by far his weakest film, as the pinnacle of his career. Countless media commentaries have referred to Boseman as a “superhero” and a “king,” referencing the actor's *Black Panther* character King T'Challa.

It is not an insult to Boseman's memory to point out the dishonest and manipulative character of this effort to canonize him. Far from

honoring Boseman's life, the media campaign around his death demeans his work and serves reactionary political ends.

Boseman was born in 1976 in Anderson, South Carolina. His mother was a nurse, and his father worked at a textile factory and managed a small upholstery business. Boseman became interested in the performing arts when he wrote his first play as a junior in high school, in response to the shooting death of a classmate.

The decades prior to Boseman's birth had seen the explosion of bitter civil rights struggles across the South as masses demonstrated in opposition to Jim Crow laws, lynchings and racial segregation. Several important struggles had taken place in Boseman's home state of South Carolina, including the 1969 Charleston hospital strike of 300 health care workers and the 1960 New Year's Day March in Greenville, which began as a protest against efforts to block Jackie Robinson from a whites-only airport waiting room.

The civil rights movement alone, however, proved incapable of solving the social ills of racism, poverty and social inequality, which were, in the final analysis, rooted in the capitalist system itself. Meanwhile, the desire of the ruling class to quell mass unrest led to the formation of affirmative action programs aimed at bringing a privileged layer of African Americans into the upper echelons of capitalist society.

Boseman came of age during a period of reaction, when formerly radical layers of the middle class intelligentsia were increasingly shedding their former leftism and orienting toward right-wing identity politics. He attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. and, after graduating, worked as a playwright and director in New York City. His work during this period, while often sensitive and intelligent, was marked by a tendency towards racialism and mythologizing.

In his artist statement for his play *Deep Azure*, about an African American woman whose fiancé is killed by a black police officer, Boseman wrote, “[T]he Hip Hop aesthetic is used to establish a world unique to *Deep Azure*, one in which the descended expressions of the African Diaspora—Hip Hop, jazz, blues—which are all affected by the Euro-American experience, are instrumental in establishing the cosmic rules of *Deep Azure*'s ritual passion. In addition, the storytelling tools of popping and locking and beat-boxing utilized by Street Knowledge, the high priests of the piece, convey their otherworldliness in a way that is organic to the world of the play.” There is a good deal of the half-baked and confused here.

Boseman acted in a number of television roles before his breakout performance in 2013's *42* as Jackie Robinson, Hall of Fame baseball player and the first black player to break Major League Baseball's color line. The film focused on the relationship between Robinson and famed Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey (Harrison

Ford). Though the film suffers from a superficial and overly personalist portrayal of the struggle to integrate baseball, the scenes between Boseman and Ford are moving, and Boseman effectively communicates Robinson's emotional intensity and steely determination in the face of constant racist provocation.

The following year, Boseman gave perhaps the finest performance of his career, as the legendary singer-performer (and fellow South Carolina native) James Brown in *Get On Up*. The film powerfully captures Brown's complexity, artistry and unstoppable musical spirit. *Get On Up*'s highlights are its performance scenes, where Boseman remarkably embodies the incandescent energy and raw emotional power of Brown's live shows. The depiction of the complicated, and sometimes violent and dysfunctional, relationships between Brown and his family, musical collaborators, and lovers creates a richer and more fully human portrait than is seen in most Hollywood biopics.

In our review of the film, the WWSWS commented, "*Get on Up* attempts with considerable success to penetrate the James Brown phenomenon. As the singer, Chadwick Boseman is mesmerizing...[Boseman] ably captures something important about Brown's outer *and* inner being. He eschews imitation."

In 2017, Boseman starred in *Marshall* as Thurgood Marshall, the civil rights lawyer who would later go on to become the first African American Supreme Court Justice. The film focuses on a case early in the young lawyer's career, where Marshall is tasked with defending a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman in the Jim Crow South. Though the film suffers from a definite one-sidedness in its uncritical portrayal of the conservative Marshall, it is still an effective and intelligent legal drama, held together largely by the quiet gravitas of Boseman's performance.

Significantly, *Marshall*'s release coincided with the onset of the right-wing #MeToo campaign, which raised the anti-democratic banner of "believe all women." The film remains valuable in its portrayal of the horrific consequences suffered by countless black men in a previous era when juries were expected to "believe women" at any cost.

Unhappily, Boseman's talented performances brought him to the attention of the Hollywood comic book movie machine. He was cast as T'Challa/Black Panther in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War* and would go on to play the character in three more films, most notably in 2018's *Black Panther*.

Of *Black Panther*, the WWSWS wrote: "The film has been overwhelmingly hailed as a 'defining moment' in African American and movie history... Such praise, however, only testifies to the general degradation of art, culture and film criticism in contemporary America. The film's supposed achievements do not save it from being a vacuous work, which does not withstand a moment of serious reflection... Apart from its racist theme, the film is nothing more than a conventional Hollywood 'blockbuster,' chock full of action sequences, explosions and the rest."

No actor could do much with such rotten material, and Boseman ends up giving a rather stiff and lifeless performance in the film (Boseman claimed to have used US president Barack Obama as inspiration for the character). It is notable that, in addition to T'Challa/Black Panther, the filmmakers include a CIA operative among the heroes.

Nevertheless, the film was seen as a watershed moment for the race-obsessed layers of the upper-middle-class. The *New York Times* called the film "a jolt of a movie" that "creates wonder with great flair and feeling."

Times' Manohla Dargis went on, "[I]n its emphasis ~~the~~ black imagination, creation and liberation, the movie becomes an emblem of a past that was denied and a future that feels very present. And in doing so opens up its world, and yours, beautifully." The film, of course, is and does none of these things.

The enormous commercial success of the film was considered a milestone in the ascendancy of the African American upper-middle-class to the significant levels of wealth and power. The depiction of Wakanda as a racial-exclusivist utopia drew praise from both the identity-obsessed pseudo-left and the fascist far right.

Boseman's life and work, and in fact, the history of African American film artists more broadly, are being misrepresented to further a deeply reactionary and anti-democratic agenda. In fact, a number of black actors, working under more difficult conditions in terms of the overall state of race relations, including the continuing existence (in some cases) of Jim Crow racism, have done more valuable and enduring work. One thinks of the work of Sidney Poitier, including *No Way Out*, *Edge of the City*, *Something of Value*, *Band of Angels* (especially), *The Defiant Ones* (despite Stanley Kramer), *A Raisin in the Sun* and others.

Richard Pryor brilliantly brought to life the struggles of a Detroit autoworker in *Blue Collar*. A list of black actors whose work had a genuine impact would include Ivan Dixon, Charles Dutton, Howard Rollins, Ossie Davis, Yaphet Kotto, Roscoe Lee Browne, Brock Peters, Moses Gunn, Paul Winfield, Bill Cobbs, Canada Lee (memorably in *Body and Soul*), Godfrey Cambridge, and more. In many cases, these actors performed in work that was far more significant in terms of its impact and influence on popular consciousness. At their best, these works had a more universal, compassionate, progressive core to them, notwithstanding all the contradictions.

At any rate, these artists were not making exclusivist, racist work of the sort that now receives the highest praise in identity politics circles.

In recent decades, Denzel Washington, Forest Whitaker, Laurence Fishburne, Jamie Foxx, Don Cheadle, Terrence Howard, Ving Rhames, Samuel L. Jackson, Delroy Lindo, Jeffrey Wright, Michael Kenneth Williams and many others have shone, but often in more regressive, limited (and worse) movies.

Boseman of course was not immune to the politics of the social circles in which he lived and worked. His final social media post before he died praised Harris's nomination to the Democratic ticket. Yet, it is a testament to his talent that he was able to create moving work *in spite of* the influences working on him.

In any case, Boseman's death is tragic, despite the contradictions of his life and career. We encourage readers to view, and remember him for, his better work.



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