Native Son: Restoration of suppressed film starring, co-scripted by author Richard Wright

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The suppressed 1951 film version of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* was released in virtual cinemas recently in a restoration presented by Kino Lorber in association with the Library of Congress, Fernando Martín Peña, and Argentina Sono Film. The film was also aired by Turner Classic Movies (TCM) this past weekend.

Shot primarily in Buenos Aires, Argentina with some exterior location shots done in Chicago, the movie was directed and co-written by Pierre Chenal, a Belgian-born director associated with French poetic realism.

In addition to co-adapting his own novel for the screen, Richard Wright performed the lead role as the ill-fated Bigger Thomas, a poor young black man in Chicago. Deeply oppressed and driven by intense fear, Bigger quickly becomes ensnared in a true American tragedy.

The restoration presents the most complete version of the film ever shown in the US, where it originally appeared only in a heavily censored version that received limited distribution. Cuts were made by the film's American distributor Walter Gould in order to get past state censor boards, which in turn intervened to make further cuts, reducing the nearly two-hour film's running time by over 30 minutes, according to Chenal.

When the director found out, he wrote to Wright in Paris: "They made terrific cuts. But as you must know, they were obliged to make them, otherwise the picture never would have been released in Democracy No. 1." In Ohio, the film was banned outright.

Seventy years after it was shot, the first film adaptation of one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century is finally available in the US in a definitive version.

Bigger Thomas (Wright) lives with his mother and younger siblings in a rat-infested tenement in the Black Belt of Chicago's South Side. The young man's dream is to fly airplanes, "but they don't want me to," he says with bitterness to his girlfriend Bessie Mears (Gloria Madison), a nightclub waitress and singer.

The plot turns when Bigger takes a job as a chauffeur for the wealthy Henry Dalton (Nicholas Joy), a respectable slumlord who overcharges Bigger's family for their "lousy kitchenette." In addition to the job, Dalton also offers Bigger room and board at his mansion in Chicago's Gold Coast, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in America. Bigger also meets Dalton's wife (Ruth Robert), a blind woman who has "a deep interest in colored people."

Bigger's first task is to drive the Daltons' daughter Mary (Jean Wallace) to her university, but the young woman instructs Bigger to pick up her boyfriend Jan Erlone (Gene Michael) for an evening of drinking instead. "You'll like Jan," she says. "He has all the answers to your problems. ... He fights for the colored people." Jan talks to Bigger about smashing Jim Crow before making a toast "to that world we're going to win."

Bigger drops off Jan and by the time he pulls up to the Dalton mansion, Mary is falling-down drunk. He helps her into her bedroom, but he's terrified of being discovered with her. "If they find me here they'll kill me," he tells her. "Don't leave me," she pleads. He is struggling to get away from Mary when Mary's blind mother enters the room. Bigger panics. Determined to keep Mary from revealing his presence, he covers her mouth with a pillow until her mother leaves the room, upon which he discovers that Mary is dead.

As Bigger later explains to Bessie, "I was scared—scared! All my life I heard of black men being killed because of white girls, and there I was. I had to get rid of the body." For a while, Bigger manages to elude the suspicions of Detective Britten (Charles Cane), who initially suspects that Jan is involved in Mary's disappearance.

When Mary's remains are discovered, Bigger flees the mansion and hides out with Bessie in an abandoned South Side building amidst a media circus that whips up racial divisions in the city. Police raids terrorize the Black Belt, culminating in Bigger's dramatic capture after a shoot-out with the cops.

Later, facing execution in the electric chair, Bigger thanks his hard-working defense attorney, Max (Don Dean), for his efforts, telling him, "I didn't know there was people in the world like you." Outside, the American flag waves in the night as the distant lights of the Chicago skyline dot the darkness above Lake Michigan.

The film paints a lacerating picture of social conditions in America's second city. The Chicago of *Native Son* is a tale of two cities with its Gold Coast mansions and its Black Belt tenements, and the film authentically captures both worlds. The location photography gives the film a kind of documentary-realism with its rare glimpses of postwar Chicago, including a remarkable sequence in which a shot of downtown's sparkling Buckingham Fountain dissolves to the "hidden world" of the South Side's Black Belt in which children play atop a scrap heap and a man picks through rubbish.

However, the Chicago footage is generally of a limited nature—exterior shots, mostly to establish the setting of a scene or to provide a transition between scenes—and the location photography itself is inferior, partly because the production was shooting in the streets of Chicago without permits, grabbing shots more or less on the fly.

Argentina and the film's background

Where the production really comes alive is in the Buenos Aires-shot material that makes up the bulk of the film. *Native Son*'s drama was brought to cinematic life at the Argentina Sono Film Studios, with lively

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staging by director Chenal. The high-contrast *film noir* visual style, with rich chiaroscuro lighting by director of photography Antonio Merayo and elaborate sets by production designer Gori Muñoz, convincingly recreates the dirty Chicago streets in the shadows of the "El" tracks and the crumbling, abandoned tenement buildings.

The film came to be produced in Argentina simply because that's where Wright was able to secure a deal that he felt would preserve the integrity of his novel. The author had rejected an earlier offer by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to produce the film in Hollywood with an all-white cast! And by the time the film was being set up at Argentina Sono Film in 1949, the atmosphere of anticommunist hysteria in the US effectively ensured that any faithful and serious film production of *Native Son* made with professional resources would have to be made primarily outside of the country.

In his first and only outing as an actor, Wright does a fine job embodying his literary creation's internal conflict. One sees in Wright's intense eyes and nervous body language the expression of Bigger's strained efforts to mask his fear by acting tough out in the streets or cool and subservient in the Dalton mansion. However, the performance is not without some awkwardness, which emerges in some flat line deliveries.

Wright had no formal training as an actor, and he was 41 when he played Bigger, whose age is supposed to be 25 in the film. Despite these challenges, Wright is vigorous and engaging enough to carry the film. Jean Wallace (*The Big Combo*) is simply superb as Mary Dalton, playing the well-meaning but insulated and presumptuous daughter of privilege with a *joie de vivre* so potent that even after her death, her vivacious presence haunts the rest of the film just as her memory haunts Bigger.

Viewing *Native Son* today, one is struck by the film's urgency. During one astonishing sequence, Chicago police terror is brutally unleashed on the population as an army of cops invades the black working class neighborhoods. Searching for one man, Chicago's "finest" raid the homes of workers and their families, bursting into crowded tenements and shoving kids around.

When one cop points his gun at a woman giving birth in her bed, an older woman in the room tells him off: "Hey you, don't you even respect a woman who's having a baby?!"

Like the cornered rat he kills in his family's one-room apartment in the film's opening, Bigger is almost always struggling for survival in a hostile environment. When Bigger is finally cornered by the police after climbing atop a water tank, a policeman gives the order to "baptize him," upon which a firefighter blasts the wanted man with the high-pressure water from a fire hose in the cold Chicago night. But in a significant revision of the novel, Bigger is captured not because of the police raids, but because of a tip from a reward-seeking informer named Snippy, a man from the Black Belt and a known "stool pigeon," as Bigger refers to him with contempt.

Richard Wright, Orson Welles and *Native Son*

Richard Wright was born in 1908 on a plantation in Roxie, near Natchez, Mississippi, which was one of the world's most important cotton ports when Wright's enslaved grandparents toiled in the fields there. Wright's father was a sharecropper and his mother was a schoolteacher. Both of his grandfathers served in the Civil War.

As a child, growing up in the Jim Crow South, Wright came to know poverty, hunger and racist humiliation. In his teenage years, he read voraciously and started writing stories. He became an admirer of journalist-critic H.L. Mencken, whose essays led the aspiring writer to discover and find inspiration in the novels of Sinclair Lewis, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser.

In 1927, Wright moved with an aunt to Chicago as part of the Great Migration. He worked a series of odd jobs, including stints as a dishwasher and a street-sweeper. Eventually, a relatively well-paying job as a postal clerk allowed him to rent a decent apartment, purchase books and develop himself more actively as a writer.

In 1933, Wright began attending meetings of the John Reed Club, a Communist Party-affiliated group of artists and writers. Upon first reading the magazines given to him by the club, Wright later observed: "The revolutionary words leaped from the printed page and struck me with tremendous force. … My attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role."

Wright's political evolution is a complex subject, which can only be touched on here. He joined the Communist Party in 1933. He was published in *The New Masses*, the CP publication, made his first attempts at novel writing and, after moving to New York, became the Harlem correspondent for the Stalinist *Daily Worker*. Along with many other American left intellectuals, in 1938, Wright publicly defended the Moscow Trials. He apparently left the CP in 1942, and, two years later, wrote an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly*, entitled "I Tried to Be a Communist."

In the late 1940s, despite having started out on a path that would take him—again, along with many others—to the right and to the defense of American "democracy" versus Soviet "totalitarianism," Wright was still considered hostile and dangerous by the US government, which continued to keep him under close surveillance. In France, Wright became friends with existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. He helped found an organization called the Franco-American Fellowship, which informers assured the State Department was a "Communist front."

Wright's *Native Son* had been an immediate best-seller when it was published in 1940, selling 215,000 copies in its first three weeks of publication. On the day the novel was published, March 1, 1940, Charles Poore wrote in the *New York Times*, "Few other recent novels have been preceded by more advance critical acclamation, or lived up to the expectations they aroused so well."

An important theatrical production of *Native Son* appeared on Broadway in 1941, directed by Orson Welles and starring Canada Lee as Bigger Thomas. Reading accounts of the production, it's clear that Welles, who had just completed *Citizen Kane*, directed *Native Son* with his characteristic bravura.

In a biography of Canada Lee, Mona Z. Smith writes: "Welles's staging put the audience in the middle of the action. … In the play's spine-tingling climax, Bigger is on the run, hiding from the police in a warehouse with his girlfriend. A neon sign blinks on [and off]. … Policemen slowly advance from the back of the theater through the aisles: 'Come out, you black bastard!' Bigger scrambles across a narrow ramp over the orchestra pit. Cowering, he fires a gun straight into the audience. Answering shots explode from the back of the house."

Certain elements of Welles's dynamic production were incorporated into Chenal's film, including the blinking neon light outside Bigger's hideout in one of the film's most visually striking and emotionally resonant scenes. From inside the abandoned tenement we see the huge neon sun of a Sunkist Oranges sign flashing on and off. The camera pulls back a little to reveal Bessie at the window looking out with immense sadness at the evocative cityscape. Lit by the bursts of harsh neon "sunlight" that pierce the darkness of the cold, crumbling tenement, Bessie tells Bigger, "The sun won't shine for us anymore." It's a heartbreaking, unforgettable moment.

While the novel's latter half is seriously weakened by its fatalism, traces

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of misanthropy and some strained religious symbolism, the negative impact of these elements is lessened considerably in the screenplay by Wright and Chenal. For instance, unlike the novel, the film does not suggest that Bigger, after murdering Bessie, “was living, truly and deeply.”

At the same time, some of the novel’s artistically and socially sharper edges are smoothed over in the film. In the novel, Bessie is a domestic driven to alcoholism because of “how hard the white folks worked her” seven days a week; in the film, Bessie is a struggling singer on the verge of her big break. In the novel, Jan is a member of the Communist Party; in the film, he’s a labor organizer.

Chenal and Wright did not set out to make a film that would be totally banned in the United States, but a portion of the novel’s concrete social truth is lost in the process. The commercial (and political) considerations involved in the production of *Native Son* led the filmmakers to self-censor even before US censors could get their hands on the film.

Still, despite its flaws, the film version of *Native Son* offers no comfort to defenders of American society. The work, powerful and haunting, is filled with striking images and moments that give one a strong sense of the texture of life in Chicago, the harshness of everyday life for the poor, the great injustices that twist human beings and the tragic events that befall the most fiercely oppressed sections of the working class.

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