

Pioneering African-American actor Sidney Poitier dead at 94

Kevin Reed**8 January 2022**

Sidney Poitier, the groundbreaking actor and first African-American movie star, died on January 6 at age 94 in Los Angeles.

Poitier was instrumental in changing the way black people were portrayed in American film. He pioneered leading roles in major Hollywood productions in the 1950s and 1960s and his characters exhibited dignity, intensity and determination, while he ended once and for all the film industry's relegation of African-American performers to stereotypical servants and entertainers.

As Poitier told *Newsweek* during a 1988 interview, "I made films when the only other Black on the lot was the shoeshine boy. I was kind of the lone guy in town."

Poitier won the Academy Award for best actor in 1964 for *Lilies of the Field* (Ralph Nelson), in which he portrayed an itinerant handyman who encounters a group of German, Austrian and Hungarian nuns in the Arizona desert who believe he has been sent to them by God to help build a new chapel.

Prior to winning the Oscar, Poitier had been nominated for best actor for his co-starring role in Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958) along with Tony Curtis. Poitier and Curtis play escaped convicts, one black and one white, who are shackled together and must cooperate in order to survive.

Poitier is also known in particular for Daniel Petrie's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), based on the Lorraine Hansberry play about an African-American working class family in Chicago; *A Patch of Blue* (Guy Green, 1965), about the friendship between an educated black man and an illiterate, blind white girl; Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), in which Poitier plays a Philadelphia detective investigating a murder in small-town Mississippi; and Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), one of the first films

to represent an interracial marriage. *Band of Angels* (1957), directed by Raoul Walsh, is a lesser acknowledged, but intriguing film set in the South prior to and during the Civil War.

In the early days of Poitier's career, when it was difficult to find suitable roles, the actor insisted that he be given an opportunity to play complex characters that depicted black men with "refinement, education and accomplishment."

Poitier's rise in Hollywood corresponded with changes in society brought about by the civil rights movement and the struggle against Jim Crow segregation in the southern US. Some of his most successful films were made during the mass movement that brought about significant political and cultural changes in American life.

Along with other Hollywood figures such as Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, Sammy Davis Jr., Marlon Brando and Paul Newman, Poitier participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 at which Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. Poitier also traveled to Neshoba County, Mississippi following the murder of civil rights workers Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner in June 1964.

Poitier was born on February 27, 1927 in Miami, Florida, the seventh child in a family from the Bahamas. He was born prematurely while his parents were visiting the US to sell tomatoes and produce. He started life in poverty on Cat Island and later Nassau in the Bahamas and, owing to his US citizenship, was able to move to Miami at age 15 to live with his brother.

The next year, Sidney moved to New York City when he learned to read while working as a dishwasher in the city's restaurant industry. He spent a year in the US army during World War II before being discharged by

feigning mental illness.

Poitier began his acting career in 1945 when he landed a role with American Negro Theater in Harlem. He struggled in the theater because he could not sing (he was tone deaf) and he also spent a year working to rid himself of his Bahamian accent. His break came when he was cast in a leading role in a Broadway production of the classical Greek comedy *Lysistrata*. His work on Broadway led to contacts in Hollywood with 20th Century-Fox.

Poitier was criticized at times for playing a flawless, idealized black man and even labeled an “Uncle Tom” for his Hollywood roles. Black playwright Clifford Mason, in a 1967 *New York Times* essay, “Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier?,” argued that the films the actor appeared in were “a schizophrenic flight from historical fact” and that Poitier was a pawn for the “white man’s sense of what’s wrong with the world.”

The film industry’s Cold War liberalism had its serious failings, but Mason’s type of attack was a right-wing criticism. His views would find sympathy among the present-day proponents of racialist identity politics. Despite the limitations of the industry within which Poitier worked, many of the characters he portrayed communicated messages about solidarity and the ability of human beings to overcome prejudice in the course of a common struggle against discrimination and oppression. To a considerable extent, Poitier’s forceful personality and intelligence transcended many of the weaknesses of his material.

The more interesting directors with whom he worked also included Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*No Way Out*, 1950), Zoltan Korda (*Cry the Beloved Country*, 1951), Richard Brooks (*The Blackboard Jungle*, 1955, and *Something of Value*, 1957), William Wellman (*Good-bye, My Lady*, 1956), Martin Ritt (*Edge of the City*, 1957, and *Paris Blues*, 1961), Otto Preminger (*Porgy and Bess*, 1959), Hubert Cornfield (*Pressure Point*, 1962), Sydney Pollack (*The Slender Thread*, 1965) and Gordon Douglas (*They Call Me Mister Tibbs!*, 1970). Poitier also directed eight feature films between 1972 and 1990.

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