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presents

I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO

Directed by Raoul Peck
From the writings of James Baldwin
With the voice of Samuel L. Jackson

ACADEMY AWARDS - Oscar Nominee Best Documentary Feature

Österreichischer Kinostart: 15.6.2017

Running Time: 93min

polyfilm Verleih

+33 6 83 22 18 06
polyfilm@polyfilm.at
www.polyfilm.at

Presse

Sonja Celeghin
celeghin@polyfilm.at
tel.: 0680 55 33 593

Download Presskit and Stills: www.polyfilm.at

SYNOPSIS

Told entirely in the words of James Baldwin, through both personal appearances and the text of his final unfinished book project, *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO* touches on the lives and assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Medgar Evers to bring powerful clarity to how the image and reality of Blacks in America today is fabricated and enforced.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

TWO ORIGINAL HISTORICAL SINS

I started reading James Baldwin when I was a 15-year-old boy searching for rational explanations to the contradictions I was confronting in my already nomadic life, which took me from Haiti to Congo to France to Germany and to the United States of America. Together with Aimée Césaire, Jacques Stéphan Alexis, Richard Wright, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alejo Carpentier, James Baldwin was one of the few authors that I could call "my own". Authors who were speaking of a world I knew, in which I was not just a footnote. They were telling stories describing history, defining structure and human relationships which matched what I was seeing around me and I could relate to them. Stories that were different because I came from a country which had a strong idea of itself, which had fought AND won against the most powerful army of the world (Napoleon's) and which had, in a unique historical manner, stopped slavery in its tracks, creating the first ever successful slave revolution in the history of the world, in 1804.

I am talking about Haiti, the first free country of the Americas. Haitians always knew the real story. And they also knew that the dominant story was not the real story. The successful Haitian Revolution was ignored by history (as Baldwin would put it: because of the bad niggers we were) because it was imposing a totally different narrative, which would have rendered the dominant slave narrative of the day untenable. The colonial conquests of the late nineteenth century would have been ideologically impossible, if deprived of their civilizational justification. And this justification would have no longer been needed if the whole world knew that these "savage" Africans had already annihilated their powerful armies (especially French and British) less than a century ago. So, what the four superpowers of the time did in an unusually peaceful consensus, was to shut down Haiti, the very first black Republic, put it under strict economical embargo and strangle it to its knees into oblivion and poverty. And then they rewrote the whole story.

THE LAND OF FREEDOM

Flash forward. I remember my years in New York as a child. A more civilized time, I thought. It was the sixties. In the kitchen of this huge middle-class apartment in the former Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn, where we lived with several other families, a kind of large oriental rug with effigies of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King hanging on the wall, the two martyrs, both legends of the time.

Except the tapestry was not telling the whole truth. It naively ignored the hierarchy between the two figures, the unbalance of power that existed between them. And thereby it nullified any ability to understand these two parallel stories, that had crossed path for a short time, and left in its wake the foggy magma of misunderstanding.

I grew up in a myth in which I was both enforcer and actor. The myth of a single and unique America. The script was well written, the soundtrack allowed no ambiguity, the actors of this utopia, black or white, were convincing. The production means of this Blockbuster-Hollywood-production were phenomenal. With rare episodic setbacks, the myth was strong, better; the myth was life, was reality. I remember the Kennedys, Bobby and John, Elvis, Ed Sullivan, Jackie Gleason, Dr. Richard Kimble, and Mary Tyler Moore very well. On the other hand, Otis Redding, Paul Robeson, and Willie Mays are only vague reminiscences. Faint stories "tolerated" in my memorial hard disk. Of course, there was "Soul Train" on television, but it was much later, and on Saturday morning, where it wouldn't offend any advertisers.

THREE MEN

Medgar Evers, died on June 12, 1963.

Malcolm X, died on February 21, 1965.

Martin Luther King Jr., died on April 4, 1968.

In the course of 5 years, these three men are assassinated. Three important men in the history of the United States of America and beyond. These three men were black, but it is not the color of their skin that connected them. They fought on quite different battlefields. And quite differently. But in the end, all three were deemed dangerous. They were unveiling the haze of racial confusion.

James Baldwin also saw through the system. And he loved these men.

He was determined to expose the complex links and similarities among these three individuals. He is going to write about them. He is going to write his ultimate book. ***Remember this House*** he will call that book.

I came upon these three men and their assassination much later. These three facts, these elements of history, from the starting point, the "evidence" you might say, for a deep and intimate personal reflection on my own political and cultural mythology, my own experiences of racism and intellectual violence.

This reflection will touch on my own story. Three "crime" scenes framing my most intimate personal itinerary between America, Black Africa, and Europe. A journey through a world which, as stated by historian Achille Mbembe, refuses to acknowledge that "*there are parallel stories of the world*" and that the dominant world must stop considering other people's stories as only "*footnotes*" of their own history.

These is exactly the point where I really needed James Baldwin. Because Baldwin knew how to deconstruct these stories. Help me in connecting the story of a liberated slave in its own nation, Haïti, and the story of modern United States of America and its own painful and bloody legacy of slavery. I could connect the dots.

Baldwin gave me a voice, gave me the words, gave me the rhetoric. All I knew though instinct or through experience, Baldwin gave it a name and a shape. I had all the intellectual weapons I needed.

WHY JAMES BALDWIN?

James Baldwin is one of the greatest North-American writers of the second half of the twentieth century. A prolific writer and brilliant social critic, he foreshadowed the destructive trends happening now in the whole western world and beyond, while always maintaining a sense of humanistic hope and dignity. He explored palpable yet unspoken intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies and the inevitable if unnamable tensions with personal identity, assumptions, uncertainties, yearning, and questing. He had an unrivaled understanding of politics and history, and above all, the human condition.

His prose is laser sharp. His onslaught is massive and leaves no room for response. Every sentence is an immediate cocked grenade. You pick it up, then realize that it is too late. It just blows up in your face. And yet he still managed to stay human, tender, accessible.

WHY NOW?

Today James Baldwin's words still catch us unprepared and with the same violent truth. An irrefutable uppercut. A body blow. There will hardly ever be anything as precise, as

just, as subtle, as more percussive, than the writing of this man. He understood all: politics, history, and most of all, the human factor.

Baldwin survived the magicians, the gurus and the smooth talkers of his time, black or whites. His thoughts are as effective today as when they were first expressed. His analysis, his judgment, his verdicts are even more percussive today than when originally written.

For sure, there has been an evolution, but within today's context of extreme violence in America, especially against blacks, this film proposes the qualified diagnostic to analyze and understand the deeper structural explanation. Despite progress, Martin seems quite lonely on the mountain top.

The cycles of violence and confusion condemned by Baldwin continue, trivialized and distorted by the influence of the press, television, Hollywood, and angry partisan politics.

How do we break these cycles when we never touch the real issues themselves? How do we address the fundamental problems of America? Never before has Baldwin's voice been so needed, so powerful, so radical, so visionary.

James Baldwin never wrote ***Remember this House***. This film's ambition is to partly fill the void.

DRAMATIC CONSTRUCTION

I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO reclaims James Baldwin's quest. Through this quest, I am also re-appropriating my own story. It is James Baldwin's words that pace the story but it is my own experience that provides the foundation, structure, rhythm, and turning points of this story. It is my own emotional syntax.

By documenting these three 'memorable' lives (Evers, King, Malcolm), we want to dissect Obama's America and revisit the central argument of a so-called "Negro problem in America." Obama unfortunately did not erase the dominant storyline. The brief euphoria of Obama's emergence, does not suddenly delete all misunderstandings, nor miraculously heals all wounds of a country built on the blood (especially the blood of others).

Against Obama's undeniable presence, we must put the reality, no less essential, of decades of myths and one-sided storytelling. We must no less rip off the protective (and numbing) veil of "liberal" thinking. Despite any real or perceived "Progress," we cannot avoid questioning the accuracy of the new symbols of change.

By acknowledging the impact of these stories on my own mythology, I must accept the fact that I lived a schizophrenic reality comprised of both myth and demystification.

A SUBJECTIVE FILMIC APPROACH

As in some of my previous films and inspired by other filmmaker's work such as Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, and even Jean Luc Godard, I wanted to return to my roots as a filmmaker (i.e. "Lumumba, death of a prophet"). A time when innocence allowed me to take risks, when political and aesthetic experimentation had no limits, when there was no model, no margin, no mark, and no dogma that couldn't be pulverized. In short: to question everything again and reclaim my freedom and my subjectivity.

I wanted this film to be different, free, not formatted. I wanted it to be a rare experiment with words, form, images, music, humor, poetry and drama. Matching a strong reality about violence, rape, racism, exploitation, abuse, massacre and injustice.

VOICE

The narrator of the film is Baldwin himself, with his violent, inescapable, insurmountable prose. Every word in this film is Baldwin's, from his books, essays, interviews, broadcasts, speeches, films, etc., (with very limited "technical" adjustments.) Words, which come from another era, but still resonate deeply today.

For these words, I needed more than an actor. I needed a "personality" a credible whole mind, a familiar voice and presence that would not distract from the essential, and yet a voice put in a very different role for a very different impact. Samuel L. Jackson was the perfect choice. And I am glad that he embraced the film and its approach.

IMAGES

The film is primarily visual and musical. The images punctuate the words and the music and vice versa. By revisiting the traditional "Black" iconography, with its clichés, the unspoken, the fundamental errors of interpretation and even, at times, the paternalistic prudery, we want to redefine its meaning and its impact.

That's why we changed not only the framing of these images, but their traditional use and their "editing" as well. We changed the backgrounds, detached the bottom, or an object on the side, enlarged a smile, scratched out a tear. Searching to deconstruct the original intents and thus expose a new meaning to the accepted iconography, unveil

buried secrets or unknown truths of the time. Familiar black&white images were colored, actual current images were transferred to black&white.

The film primarily uses archival images from private and public photos; film clips, Hollywood classics, documentaries, film and TV interviews, popular TV shows, TV debates, public debates and contemporary images. A kaleidoscopic, featuring frantic and poetic assemblage (a medley), all in Baldwin's very own, peculiar style.

ABOUT RAOUL PECK

Raoul Peck's complex body of work includes films "The Man by the Shore" (Competition Cannes 1993); "Lumumba" (Director's Fortnight, Cannes 2000, also bought and aired by HBO); He directed and produced "Sometimes in April" for HBO (Berlinale 2005); "Moloch Tropical" (Toronto 2009, Berlin 2010); and his latest film "Murder in Pacot" (Toronto 2014, Berlin 2015).

His documentaries include "Lumumba, Death of a Prophet" (1990); "Desounen" (1994, BBC); "Fatal Assistance" (Berlinale, Hot Docs 2013), etc.

He served as jury member at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, as well as jury member at the Berlinale 2002. He is presently chairman of the National French film school La Femis, and is the subject of numerous retrospectives worldwide. In 2001, the Human Rights Watch Organization awarded him with the Irene Diamond Lifetime Achievement Award.

His latest feature film, "The Young Karl Marx", will premiere at the 67th Berlinale.

FILMOGRAPHY

Feature Films

1988 - **Haitian Corner** Locarno 1988, Forum - Berlinale 1988
1993 - **The Man by the Shore** Official Competition Cannes Film Festival, 1993
1997 - **It's all about love** Festival de Montréal
2000 - **Lumumba** Director's Fortnight, Cannes 2000
2005 - **Sometimes in April** (HBO) Official Competition Berlinale--, 2005
2009 - **Moloch Tropical** (ARTE) Toronto, Dubai 2009; Berlin, Tribeca 2010.
2014 - **Murder in Pacot** Toronto 2014, Berlinale 2015
2017 - **The Young Karl Marx**, Berlinale Gala 2017

Documentaries

1991 - **Lumumba - Death of a Prophet** Award for Best Documentary, Festival de Fribourg
1992, New York Film Festival, Cinéma du Réel
1994 - **Desounen, Dialogue with Death** (BBC, ARTE)
1994 - **Haiti, Silence of the Dogs** (ARTE)
2001 - **Profit and nothing but!** (ARTE, RTBF)
2013 - **Fatal Assistance**, Berlinale 2013, San Francisco, Hot Docs 2013
2016 - **I Am Not Your Negro**, TIFF 2016, New York Film Festival 2016, Berlinale Panorama 2017

TV Drama

2006 - **L'Affaire Villemin** (6x60', ARTE, France 3) Price of the Union of French Critics
2008 - **L'école du Pouvoir** (4x60', CANAL+, ARTE) Festival Européen des 4 Ecrans

CREDITS

I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO

(93 min. USA/France/Belgium/Switzerland)

Directed by Raoul Peck

Written by James Baldwin

With the voice of Samuel L. Jackson

Producers: Rémi Grellety, Raoul Peck, Hébert Peck

Co-producers: Patrick Quinet, Joëlle Bertossa

With the full support and collaboration of the James Baldwin Estate

Editor: Alexandra Strauss

Cinematographer: Henry Adebonojo, Bill Ross, Turner Ross

Animator: Michel Blustein

Sound: Valérie Le Docte, David Gillain

Music: Alexei Aigui

Archival research: Marie-Hélène Barbéris Assisted by Nolwenn Gouault

ARTE France: Fabrice Puchault, Alex Szalat

Executive Producers for ITVS: Sally Jo Fifer, Lois Vossen

Executive Producer for NBPC: Leslie Fields-Cruz

Produced by Velvet Film, Inc. (USA), Velvet Film (France), Artémis Productions, Close Up Films

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