

A Timeline of Black British Film Actors

The Victorian and Edwardian eras and the First World War

In 1898 the celebrated composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor premiered his most famous work, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, and in 1900 the first Pan-African Conference took place in London. Several thousand black people were living in Britain by the end of the Edwardian era, mostly in the dockland areas of Cardiff, Liverpool and Canning Town in London's East End. During the First World War many black troops from Britain's African and Caribbean colonies become involved including The West India and West Indies Regiments. In 1919 black communities are attacked in 'race' riots in several British cities.

In 1896, at the birth of world cinema, *The Wandering Negro Minstrels* shows half-a-dozen blackface minstrels busking on a London street. In the Victorian era it was the tradition for white actors to 'black up' on stage, and this practice continued in the early years of British cinema, but a breakthrough came in the Edwardian era. Ernest Trimmingham, from Bermuda, played featured roles in several silent films, including a cowboy in the western *Jack, Sam and Pete* (1919).

1920s

In 1925 the West African Students' Union was founded.

Orlando Martins, from Lagos, Nigeria, began working as a film extra and enjoyed a long and successful career as a character actor in films like *Men of Two Worlds* (1946), *The Hasty Heart* (1949) and *The Nun's Story* (1959). Upon his retirement in 1970 the British Actors' Equity Association awarded Orlando an honorary life membership in recognition of his impressive career in British films.

1930s

In 1931 the League of Coloured Peoples was founded in London by the Jamaican community leader Dr. Harold Moody, who is now recognised as Britain's answer to Dr. Martin Luther King. It became the most influential organisation that campaigned for the rights of African and Caribbean settlers in Britain. In 1935 the Jamaican nationalist Marcus Garvey moved to Britain and ran the Universal Negro Improvement Association from London.

In the late 1930s Paul Robeson, the charismatic African-American actor, singer and political activist, became the first black actor to attain stardom in British films. He disowned his first British film, *Sanders of the River* (1935), because extra scenes were added, without the actor's knowledge or approval, which glorified the British Empire and colonialism. He said: "I had no idea that it would have such a turn *after* I had acted in it. Moreover, when it was shown at its premiere in London and I saw what it was, I was called to the stage and in protest refused to perform." However, Robeson did find British film makers more welcoming than those in Hollywood, and willing to listen to his point of view. In films like *Song of Freedom* (1936) and *Jericho* (1937) he played the screen's first heroic black characters. He described *The Proud Valley* (1940), set in a Welsh mining town, "the one film I could be proud of having played in." These films helped to establish Robeson as a box office attraction, but with the outbreak of the Second World War, and the (temporary) closure of film studios, Robeson returned to the United States.

Robeson's films provided work for a number of British-based black actors including the American cabaret singer Elisabeth Welch, who was Robeson's leading lady in two films (*Song of Freedom* and *Big Fella*), and Robert Adams, a former wrestler from Guyana.

1940s

It has been estimated that there were at least 15,000 black people in Britain in 1939, but during the Second World War (1939-45) many thousands of African and Caribbean people were recruited by the British government. They arrived in Britain to support the war effort, both in the armed services and in munitions factories. In 1943, when the Trinidadian cricketer and war worker Learie Constantine was refused accommodation in a London hotel, he accused the hotel of racism, took them to court, and won his case. In 1946 the West Indian Students' Union was formed. In 1948 the *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks, Kent.

In *Men of Two Worlds* (1946) Robert Adams became the first black British actor to play a leading role in a British film when he was cast as Kisenga, an 'educated' African who comes into conflict with his own cultural traditions. He said: *"If all my screen parts were as dignified, human and moving as the one in Men of Two Worlds, then one might soon be able to influence cinemagoers in the right direction. And if they see Negroes playing cultured, intelligent people often enough, they will begin to realize that the coloured man is not necessarily a superstitious, hymn-singing buffoon...The most powerful of all vehicles of education has been, and still is, the screen."*

1950s

In 1958 the Institute of Race Relations was established and Claudia Jones, one of Britain's key black leaders, founded and edited the *West Indian Gazette*. That same year there were race riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill, and Kelso Cochrane, a West Indian carpenter, was murdered in Notting Hill by white youths. In 1959 the launch of a campaign in Britain to boycott South African goods led to the founding of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. An indoor event at St Pancras Town Hall in London was the beginning of Notting Hill Carnival. It took to the streets in the 1960s. In 1958, in the world of theatre, Errol John's play *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (Royal Court Theatre, London) was the first major British production of the work of a black dramatist. That same year Edric Connor became the first black British actor to play a Shakespearean role when he was cast as Gower in *Pericles* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford.

In the post-war years, with settlers coming to Britain from Africa and the Caribbean, liberal-thinking film makers began to explore racial conflict in Britain's inner cities. In the first of these, *Pool of London* (1950), Bermuda's Earl Cameron made his screen debut as a Jamaican sailor on shore leave in London. Earl said: *"It was a fabulous part and I appeared all through the picture."* Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Earl gave memorable performances in a number of British films, including *Sapphire* (1959), *Flame in the Streets* (1961) and *Guns at Batasi* (1964). Actress Nadia Cattouse often worked with Earl: *"We [black actors in Britain] had the highest regard for him. We all liked and admired him. He worked all the time, and gave each role tremendous dignity and humanity."* Earl's most recent screen appearances have included *The Queen* (2007) with Helen Mirren. Says Earl: *"My experiences of theatre, television and films have been wonderful. I've enjoyed every minute of it. I don't look at myself as a great actor. Others can judge that."*

Two Americans, Canada Lee and Sidney Poitier, came to Britain to star in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1952), based on Alan Paton's anti-apartheid novel, but the cast also included the Trinidadian Edric Connor and the South African Lionel Ngakane. Both actors went on to have careers in British films. In 1956 Edric made an impressive appearance as the harpooner Daggoo in *Moby Dick* and founded the Edric Connor Agency with his wife, Pearl. The agency represented actors from Africa and the Caribbean. Said Pearl: *"Edric was looked upon as a father figure in Britain's black community. He moved into this country and took every opportunity he had to make a lasting mark so that those who came after him would know that it was possible...In Britain there is no record of the contribution we have made. Edric did good work, but it is lost in time and space. There is no memory in Britain for us. There is a hole in the ground, and we fall into it."*

1960s

In 1962 Jamaica and (later) Trinidad and Tobago became the first of Britain's Caribbean colonies to gain independence. In 1968 Enoch Powell made his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech at Walsall. In 1969 the newsletter of the Institute of Race Relations becomes the radical journal *Race Today*.

Films like *A Taste of Honey* (1961) with Paul Danquah, and *The L-Shaped Room* (1962) and *Heaven's Above* (1963) with Brock Peters, presented black actors in roles as ordinary characters involved in everyday life, while two critically acclaimed short films, *Ten Bob in Winter* (1963) with Bari Jonson, and *Jemima and Johnny* (1966) with Thomas Baptiste, were the first fiction films made by black film directors in Britain.

In 1967 the Oscar-winning Hollywood superstar Sidney Poitier returned to Britain to play the lead in a film adaptation of E. R. Braithwaite's autobiographical novel *To Sir, With Love*. This was based on Braithwaite's experiences as a teacher in a tough school in London's East End. *To Sir, With Love* was one of Poitier's most commercially successful films and helped him to the number one position at the American box office in 1968.

In the wake of Enoch Powell's inflammatory 'Rivers of Blood' speech, black actors found it difficult to find work in Britain and some established names, like Errol John, Calvin Lockhart and Johnny Sekka, left for the United States. The actress Nadia Cattouse later said: "Powell put a threat over us. In the 1960s Powell's speeches led to hostility and attempts to either pretend we weren't here, or make sure we weren't visible."

1970s

In 1976 the Commission for Racial Equality was established.

The long-running situation comedy series *Love Thy Neighbour* was very popular with television audiences in the 1970s, and gave starring roles to Rudolph Walker and Nina Baden-Semper. The big screen version, released in 1973, repeated the set-up of a white couple living next door to a black couple with the husbands constantly at loggerheads, but for many the constant use of racist language and behaviour seemed a debatable subject for humour.

Pressure (1975) is acknowledged as the first feature film by a black British director: Horace Ove. It brought to the screen the very real problems faced by the black community in Britain in the 1970s, and featured outstanding performances by Herbert Norville, Oscar James, Sheila Scott-Wilkinson and the veteran character actor Frank Singuineau, a Trinidadian who had been playing minor roles in British films for nearly three decades.

For his engaging performance as a confidence trickster in the upbeat comedy *Black Joy* (1977), filmed on location in Brixton, the charismatic Guyanese actor Norman Beaton won the Variety Club of Great Britain's Best Film Actor award. This was the first time a black actor had received a film award in Britain. He said: "I was put at the top table with Sir Alec Guinness. When I heard my name called it was the most wonderful moment in my life. I had disproved the claim 'They can't act, there are no black actors.'"

The Sailor's Return (1978), a Victorian story of love and racial hatred, included a memorable performance by the newcomer Shope Shodeinde as a confused yet dignified African princess, married to a sea Captain. In 1979 Paul Robeson's leading lady in 1930s films, Elisabeth Welch, returned to the screen and sang her signature song, 'Stormy Weather' in *The Tempest*. Ten years later Elisabeth became the only artiste honoured for British cinema when she was inducted into America's Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.

1980s

In 1980 and 1981 Britain witnessed riots in Bristol, Brixton and Toxteth. In 1980 Daley Thompson won a gold medal at the Moscow Olympics. In 1982 *The Voice* newspaper was launched. In 1984 the Centre for Caribbean Studies was established at the University of Warwick and Tessa Sanderson became the first black British woman to win Olympic gold. In 1987 Black History Month was launched in Britain and the General Election sees Dianne Abbott, Paul Boateng and Bernie Grant elected as the first black Labour MPs.

Babylon (1980), starring Brinsley Forde, and *Burning an Illusion* (1981), starring Cassie McFarlane, successfully explored the lives of second-generation Africans and Caribbeans in Britain's inner cities. For *Burning an Illusion* Cassie became the first black actress to win a film award in Britain when the *Evening Standard* named her the Most Promising Newcomer. For *Mona Lisa* (1986) Cathy Tyson became the first black British actress to be nominated for a BAFTA.

In 1986 Norman Beaton gave a memorable performance as the captain of a cricket team in *Playing Away* with a screenplay by the black writer Carly Phillips. In 1994, when Beaton died, he had been Britain's leading black actor for over two decades. Towards the end of his life, Beaton reflected: "My own view is that what you've seen me in are the only roles that are available for black men in this country, and they don't really reflect our views, our understanding of life, our intelligence, or where we are coming from. In that respect I would say that Caryl Phillips' scenario for *Playing Away* did get around that particular hurdle. It lived up to nearly all the expectations that black people ought to be living up to."

Though experienced black British actors were available, the tradition of importing African-Americans for roles in British films continued with Denzel Washington taking the leads in *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *For Queen and Country* (1988). The black British actor Gary McDonald told the *Caribbean Times* that he was supposed to play the lead in *For Queen and Country* and was shocked when he was replaced by Washington: "I worked on it for about four weeks. I was gutted. If a black actor from this country had been used it would really help get things moving for us here."

1990s

In 1991 the Black and Asian Studies Association is founded. In 1993 Stephen Lawrence was murdered in a racist attack in south east London and in 1999 the MacPherson Report into his murder investigation criticised the Metropolitan Police Force's investigation into Stephen's death. In 1998 the fiftieth anniversary of *Empire Windrush* was celebrated.

In the 1980s and early 1990s the independent sector gave a boost to young black film-makers and they provided interesting and challenging work for black British actors. These films included *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986), *Dreaming Rivers* (1988), starring Corinne Skinner-Carter, *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), *Who Needs a Heart* (1991), and *Welcome II the Terrordome* (1994).

In 1996 actress Carmen Munroe summed up the feelings of many black British actors when she made the following observation: "I feel disheartened every time I look at the screen and see something like *Brideshead Revisited*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* that will exclude most of the minority ethnic artists living in this country."

Some of the most exciting and innovative British films of the 1990s were shorts. Over sixty were made by African and Caribbean and other minority directors including *The Concrete Garden* (1994), *Sidney's Chair* (1995), *Constance* (1998), starring Dona Croll, and *Driving Miss Crazy* (1999).

For Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1996) Marianne Jean-Baptiste earned Oscar and BAFTA nominations, but she expressed her disappointment when British Screen failed to invite her to a reception for young British actors at the Cannes Film Festival: "I thought this is so unfair. It was a snub. What more do they want? I made history. I see myself as British and I want to be celebrated by Britain. I don't want to sound like someone who has a chip on their shoulder. But if you keep quiet nothing will ever change and nothing will ever be done about it." Three years later Marianne gave another memorable performance in the television drama *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence* (1999).

In 1997 Paul Barber was featured in the box office hit *The Full Monty* and in 1998 the musical extravaganza *Babymother* found favour with young black audiences.

Since 2000

In 2000 the Institute of Commonwealth Studies launched Caribbean Studies, Black and Asian History Project (CASBAH) and the murder of Peckham schoolboy Damilola Taylor made international headlines. In 2002 Paul Boateng became the first black Cabinet minister and in 2003 Baroness Amos became the first black woman to be a Cabinet minister.

In recent years a new generation of black British actors have been enjoying mainstream success in British films and some of them have also found work in Hollywood. These include Adrian Lester (*Primary Colors*), Sophie Okonedo (*Dirty Pretty Things*, *Hotel Rwanda*), Chiwetel Ejiofor (*Dirty Pretty Things*, *Kinky Boots*), Abdul Salis (*Flyboys*), Claire-Hope Ashitey (*Children of Men*), David Harewood (*Blood Diamond*) and Marsha Thomason (*The Haunted Mansion*). Others like Eamon Walker, Colin Salmon, David Oyelowo, Don Warrington, Lennie James, Naomie Harris, Nikki Amuka Bird, Robbie Gee, Ray Fearon, Shaun Parkes, Mona Hammond, Vas Blackwood and Kwame Kwei-Armah have also succeeded in playing a range of parts.

For his naturalistic performance in *Bullet Boy* (2004), Ashley Walters won the British Independent Film Award for Most Promising Newcomer.

In 2008, Noel Clarke, star of two highly acclaimed films, *Kidulthood* (2006) and *Adulthood* (2008), was nominated for a BAFTA Rising Star Award.

Compiled by Stephen Bourne

Stephen Bourne is the author of Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television (Continuum, 2001) which was shortlisted for The Voice newspaper's Black Community Award for Literature.

We hope you found this information interesting. If you've got anything to contribute in terms of seminal examples of on-screen diversity in the last decade please let us know. We may upload your examples to this site.