



## William Greaves

**B**orn in Harlem, William Greaves began his career as a professional actor, playing the lead in the Shubert Production *A Young American*. He went on to work on the Broadway stage, on television and in films and was featured in the 1949 film *Lost Boundaries*. He also played the romantic lead in 1947's *Miracle in Harlem* and is a member of the prestigious Actors Studio.

In 1951, Greaves left his acting career to pursue work as a filmmaker and left the United States for Canada, where he joined the production staff of the National Film Board of Canada. Greaves's documentary films include, most recently, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (2001), narrated by Sidney Poitier. Other films include *Ida B. Wells : A Passion for Justice* for PBS (1989), *Black Power in America: Myth or Reality?* (1987), *Booker T. Washington: The Life and Legacy* (1983), *From These Roots* (1974), and *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966).

From 1968 to 1970, Greaves was the executive producer and cohost of the groundbreaking public affairs network television series *Black Journal*. Greaves's films have earned more than seven international film awards, an Emmy and four Emmy nominations. In 1980 he was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame and that same year was honored at the first Black American Independent Film Festival in Paris. He is also a recipient of an "Indy," the Special Life Achievement Award of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers.

In addition to his documentary work, Greaves executive-produced the hit motion picture *Bustin' Loose* (1981), with Richard Pryor and Cicely Tyson. He also produced three other feature

films: *Ali, the Fighter* (1971), starring Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, *The Marijuana Affair*, starring Calvin Lockhart and Ingrid Wang, and the recently rediscovered avant-garde Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: *Take One* (1968).

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**GA:** Tell me about growing up in Harlem. How did you become a great filmmaker?

**WG:** I would tell you my age if I told you I was a Harlem Renaissance baby. But around that time—1936—I mean, I grew up in the center of Harlem, 135th Street and Lenox Avenue to be specific. It's now called Malcolm X Boulevard, which is where the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is. I grew up there, and later on I knew some of these legendary people. Countee Cullen was a teacher of mine in Frederick Douglass Junior High School at one point, and various other people in the Harlem Renaissance. I was a kid, but I would see, for example, filmmaker Oscar Micheaux carrying these bags and going into a bar and grill called The Big Apple on 135th Street and Seventh Avenue, which was across the street from his office. He'd set up his projector and show his films, because he had to do a lot of his own distribution. I didn't know who he was or what he was or anything. The point I'm making is that my Harlem growing-up experience was a marvelous experience. I got to know all these different people who were very conscious. Harlem was a very politically, socially, culturally conscious place—much more, I think, than today.

**GA:** How did you evolve? You started off in engineering at City College of New York and later got into dance, correct?

**WG:** Yes, I started in engineering at City College in 1943. I went to Stuyvesant High School in New York City. That was my major launch pad other than the Frederick Douglass Junior High School I went to in Harlem. My father liked the idea of my being an artist until I wanted to go to high school. I wanted to go to Music and Art High School, but he said, "No, no. Go study a trade." So I chose Stuyvesant High School in New York City, which is a science school. This pleased my father, but Stuyvesant was and still is a very competitive high school. In fact, it's the most competitive high school in New York. You have to take a test to be accepted, and I got in. As a matter of fact, I just found out recently that I graduated in the top 10 percent of my class. Many years later, Stuyvesant did a whole tribute thing on me and gave me an award as one of its most distinguished graduates. Stuyvesant was a great experience, because Stuyvesant moved me towards technology and science and things of that kind, all of which has proved helpful to me as an artist. I took a very competitive examination and got into City College here in New York, but I ultimately

dropped out because I got involved in African dance with Asadata Dafora's dance company and then was invited to join the original Pearl Primus Dance Company. In 1945 I then went on to audition for a theater group, the American Negro Theater.

**GA:** *What led you to dance?*

**WG:** A Haitian friend of mine, Mark Desgraves's life involved dance. Mark's father was a professor, he taught Afro American, African and Haitian history, about Toussaint L'Overture, Henry Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and all those people who were leaders in Haiti at the time of the revolution against Napoleon. So he used to teach us every Saturday morning, and it was wonderful. Mark danced in a Haitian dance group, and both of us were good social dancers. We used to go to the Renaissance Ballroom in Harlem and dance with the girls.

**GA:** *Then from dance to acting. Tell me about that.*

**WG:** From dance to acting and songwriting, and a whole lot of things that were creative.

**GA:** *Yes, and even Broadway.*

**WG:** Broadway, yes, as an actor. I performed in the original companies of *Finian's Rainbow* (1947) and *Lost in the Stars* (1949). Both were hit plays. I had featured roles in *Lost in the Stars* and the hit movie *Lost Boundaries*.

**GA:** *I know that you were somewhat disenchanted with the roles for African American actors when you were acting, leading to your making your own films. Tell me about that.*

**WG:** Well, after you've studied African history, and the highly advanced civilizations that flourished in Africa in antiquity, you're not ready to play "Stepin Fetchit" roles in movies on Broadway, not in a racist society.

**GA:** [Laughs] *Can you talk about your African studies and how that influenced you creatively?*

**WG:** While I was an actor, I used to go up to the Ethiopian library in Harlem and take classes with William Leo Hansberry, who was the uncle of Lorraine Hansberry. He was also a history professor at Howard University. In that class were some people whose names you may know. I hate to say classmates of mine—I was the mascot of the group, I was the young kid, young Turk. But people like John Henrik Clarke; Jean Hudson, who was the head of the Schomburg; J. A. Rogers, who was a historian; and George Haynes, Richard B. Moore . . . a number of very interesting people who were very much involved with the retrieval of our lost history.

**GA:** Where exactly was this Ethiopian library in Harlem?

**WG:** It was in Harlem on 138th Street, not far from the Stanford White houses. So while I was in the theater I could go there on the weekends for these classes. I always had a sense of my own sort of dignity, and I never liked the stereotypical depictions of us on the movie screens of America that were going on with people like Stepin Fetchit, Rochester and Hattie McDaniel, and so on. With all due respect to them, they had to make a living, so God bless them. But I just didn't want to subject myself to any of that, and I never did. I did a film called *Lost Boundaries*. In that film, you'll see that the types of roles I played were a precursor to those played by Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte, who were all friends of mine at that time growing up. But at that time, I was at the head of the pack until getting into this African history thing. I became so progressively excited about African history and I began to learn that I could make these documentary films about the truth—about who we are as a people—and I became so excited that I stopped acting. [Laughs] And I left the country for Canada in 1952 when I couldn't break into the racist film industry here.

**GA:** So you actually attempted to make films in the United States before going to Canada?

**WG:** Oh, yeah. I tried to get into the American film industry, but by 1952 the era of the "race films" had come to a close. By "race films" I mean those films that were made by and about Black people, that were not derogatory like the products of Hollywood. All of those nonstereotypical Black films were put out of business because of the changes in the politics of segregation and discrimination in America. After World War II, Black people could go to the theaters downtown, where whites went, and all that stuff. So a lot of the race films lost their market. But when I tried to get into the mainstream industry I wasn't allowed to, because the apartheid nature of America was still very strong at that time and it was vicious. So what I did was, I said, "To hell with this, I'm not going to hang around here and let this crazy, psychotic place make a fool out of me." [Laughs] I left the country and I got on the production staff of the National Film Board in Canada, which was a great experience. I started off as an apprentice, assistant editor, assistant director, and then I became a sound editor and then an editor and then chief editor of a very important, award-winning unit there. I then went on to become a writer and director. I went through the whole pathway of filmmaking.

**GA:** How long were you in Canada?

**WG:** Eleven years.

**GA:** You did a memorable documentary in Canada called *Emergency Ward*? Tell me about that.

**WG:** Right, it was shot in the cinema verité technique, which at that time was very revolutionary.

As a matter of fact, the National Film Board brought cinema verité to America in 1957. We were involved with cinema verité before a lot of the people in the U.S.—like Maysles, Wiseman and Pennybaker—were involved in it. They got into it about two or three years after the Canadians.

**GA:** You also did some work for the United Nations.

**WG:** Yes, I worked for the United Nations from 1961 to '63 and then I left the U.N. once I got the opportunity to set up my own company in 1964. I then did work on contract for the United States Information Agency (USIA) under George Stevens, Jr., who was the head of the Agency's film unit.

**GA:** What type of films did you do for the U.N.?

**WG:** I did a film on the flight of an airliner called *Cleared for Takeoff*. As a matter of fact, when I left the National Film Board I became a public information officer for films and radio for the International Civil Aviation Organization, a U.N. agency up there in Canada, and eventually ended up in the U.N. in New York.

**GA:** What was it like working with the U.N.? Was it exciting?

**WG:** Yes, it was a very fascinating experience, because I flew around the world twice making a film about the flight of an airliner around the world, and the international cooperation was critical to ensure safe air travel. So that was very interesting. Alistair Cooke was the on-camera talent, and I directed the film and wrote the basic script.

**GA:** Tell me about the film you did for the USIA called *The Wealth of a Nation*.

**WG:** They wanted to do a film showing in Cold War terms that America was friendly to dissent and very much a free society where people could speak their minds freely. So they asked me to do this film called *A Nation of Dissenters* about people who challenge the authorities. I started working on it, and it came to pass that when they realized that I was focusing on various popular dissenters, they decided that they didn't really want that much dissent. [Laughs] It took a long time to do the film; we had to redefine the parameters of the original theme. The new theme was what it meant to be in a nation in which there is freedom of individual expression. We did this film and it was interesting, and I moved around the country filming, and it was very mind-expanding. From there on, I just kept working on social-welfare films for the government. The United States government was my biggest client, because without the government I wouldn't have been a filmmaker. Racism was still so rampant in the movie industry, as far as people of color behind the

camera were concerned, that even though I had all these credentials—I could write, produce, direct and all of that—I couldn't get any work from the mainstream film industry here. As a matter of fact, I think during the 1960s I was probably the most experienced Black filmmaker in the country. I don't think any of them, even Gordon Parks and various other people, had my depth of filmmaking experience. I had eighty films under my belt. But never mind that, it still didn't cut any ice with the industry, and I'm very glad in a way, because it forced me to be an independent, as I might have ended up in some Hollywood studio and been coerced into selling my soul.  
[Laughs]

**GA:** Your film *First World Festival of African Arts* is incredible. How did that come about?

**WG:** I did that for USIA, the United States Information Agency. If you see that film you'd never know that it was a U.S. government propaganda film, because it wasn't. From my point of view, it talked about our heritage as a people and it traded on the concept of Negritude. Well, Leopold Senghor was the president of Senegal and had become a very important person in the French parliament, but he was also a poet. Amiee Cesaire at the time was a very major intellectual from Martinique and Alioune Diop was an important political philosophical figure, and the three got together and put on this *First World Festival of African Arts*, which the USIA got wind of and decided to send a crew to Africa to film a piece of the festival for a news clip for the *Agency's Screen* magazine. When I got there I said, "Wow, this thing is fantastic." And I realized that the significance of the whole event was major. So I was able to do this film, which actually was only supposed to be this *Screen* magazine film but ended up being determined by Senghor and Diop and other organizers of the festival, to be the official record of the festival. The Russians were there with a large film crew of more than fifteen to twenty in terms of people. So were the French, Belgians, Italians and other countries there with large film crews. I only had three on my crew. There was me and my cameraman—both of us did the camera work. Believe it or not, I trained my chauffeur to record sound, and so we made this film with only a three-man crew.

**GA:** That's amazing.

**WG:** Yeah, and then I brought the footage back to America and cut it. As a matter of fact, I shot a sequence with Langston Hughes, and he is in the opening of the film mingling with fishermen bringing in their nets of fish from the ocean. I invited him to see a rough cut and he really loved it. I took the style of his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and used variations on it throughout the film. And it was the most popular United States Information Agency film in Africa for about ten years.

**GA:** That's great. Given your extensive coverage of Black people in your films, some call you the Chronicler of the Black Experience. How do you feel about that?

**WG:** Well, chronicler, I've been called a griot, the dean and—I don't know, all those marvelous accolades, which are very nice. It's encouraging to have that kind of attention, respect and so on, but fortunately, I think I'm a little too old for it to go to my head at this point. I just sort of listen to it for whatever it's worth.

**GA:** You've covered so many wonderful aspects of African American history, but we seem to live in a society that doesn't value history at all. Does it concern you sometimes that audiences, especially young audiences who could benefit the most from your stories, may not appreciate them?

**WG:** One of the most depressing experiences occurred this past year when we showed the Ralph Bunche film to an audience of high school seniors in Westchester [County, New York]. The town in which we showed the film is largely white, and so they decided to draw the audience from the schools in the greater area. Knowing that, here I am, a Black filmmaker showing this film about a Black man. And they got the idea that they ought to bring in some Black students from the other communities, like Mt. Vernon, New York. They wanted them to learn about their history. It was interesting to me that some of these Black kids took to it, but some of them were asleep by the end of the film. None of the white kids were asleep, which was interesting to me. It tells you the degree to which we have been and are being mentally enslaved by not getting our kids to focus on the whole range of things that have occurred in the past that really have to do with their present and future, that has to do with their minds and ultimately their families and communities.

But fade out, fade in, I was down at Spelman College in front of an audience of young Black female students, and after it was over students came up to me and complimented me on the film. One girl, I saw her sort of push her way through the crowd that was around me and she said, "Mr. Greaves, I enjoyed your film very much. It really meant a lot to me, and I think I learned a great deal that I didn't know. Dr. Bunche was a very important man, and I want you to remember me, because I'm going to be president of the United States someday." I looked at this girl and I said [Laughs], "This is fantastic." I said, "Right on, sister!" Also, at Morehouse I had an audience of about six hundred Black male students.

**GA:** I went to Morehouse.

**WG:** Oh, did you? The Morehouse students were quiet as mice, just vacuuming it up, the infor-

mation in the film. It was marvelous. I said, "Jesus Christ. This is why I want to make movies—to get this kind of reaction."

**GA:** They gave you hope that it's not in vain.

**WG:** Oh, yeah. But to answer your question, when they go to sleep, that really kills me.

**GA:** When we first started talking, you mentioned that a lot of those in media don't understand the power of the media. The interesting thing about your film *Black Power in America: Myth or Reality?*, was that power was discussed consistently—the movers and shakers of power.

**WG:** Sure.

**GA:** I like the way you talk about power in the film. Do Blacks have power in the media today, and how can that power be used more responsibly and to empower?

**WG:** Well, you know, with all due respect, BET has a lot of power but they're not using it properly at all. Some of the things they do, yes, I'm sure they're community-based, but there's a lot of silliness that goes on, and I guess part of it is marketing. There is a market for that, but I don't feel that there's a kind of will there to educate. Ebony magazine and Jet magazine, the Johnson publications, you feel that even though they are commercial that they've got Lerone Bennett there [the Black historian], they're trying to do something positive along with being commercial.

**GA:** Absolutely.

**WG:** But with BET you don't get that impulse, that feeling.

**GA:** Well, in speaking of Jet, you can frequently read something very informative about Black people in that magazine that hasn't been chronicled elsewhere.

**WG:** Exactly.

**GA:** For example, they'll cover someone being awarded an honorary degree someplace, someone who was hired at a university, or if an important Black figure has passed away.

**WG:** [John] Johnson in a way is unheralded, because on the one hand the nationalists, militants and progressives want to get this show on the road and feel he's going too slow. But he has done more to help an overall consciousness raising than any other publisher that we have that I know of. He's done those series on Black history and all kinds of things, long before they were doing it



in the white media, so he really is to be, in a sense, applauded, and I'm sorry that he doesn't run BET instead of the other Johnson. [Laughs]

**GA:** And now BET's owned by Viacom. One thing that I notice in your films is that a great deal of your subjects seem to have nobility. They have honor and courage and you're able to bring this out in the films, whether it be Ralph Bunche or Booker T. Washington. How are you able to illuminate such a quality in these African Americans?

**WG:** I think it's in the choices that we make.

**GA:** Yes.

**WG:** I choose people who are interesting and who are into mental liberation, psychological emancipation. Those are the people who I feel should be role models and an inspiration for people who will someday become leaders in human affairs. We have a political problem in America of gaining full first-class citizenship status, and it's an ongoing problem, so it makes sense to choose those kinds of people. Because, as Paul Robeson said, "The Negro artist has to choose freedom or slavery." For him, he had made his choice.

I was having dinner with his son [Paul Robeson, Jr.] last night. We talked about the future film that he and I wanted to make about his father's life. I'm certainly encouraging it as much as possible. But the quality that you're picking up is the quality of the people who mentored me, like William Leo Hansberry, and people whose names you wouldn't know, like Taiyi Seifert, Austin Briggs Hall, Prince Akiki Nyabongo. There are numbers of people who were close friends and colleagues and mentors, people like Sam Countee, an artist, a very talented man.

There are these various people who I was fortunate to be tutored by and work with, like Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio, and Elia Kazan, the director who was one of my teachers there. At the film board in Canada I had some great mentors up there, like Tom Daly. I was also very heavily involved in spiritual development and being mentored by Sri Aurobindo, an Indian philosopher and mystic who I never met in person. He died in 1950, but his writings were very influential in my thinking. As a matter of fact, in *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*, you'll see a lot of his influences. Langston Hughes and Sri Aurobindo were the two spiritual forces behind my creation of that film.

**GA:** Tell me about your film *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*.

**WG:** I'm very pleased with the Bunche film now, because we worked very hard on it. It was going to be a six-part series, and then we couldn't get it into the PBS system at that length, so we had to

cut it down to four parts and then to three parts and then finally to a two-hour special. We got help from the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Cosbys and various other foundations like the National Black Programming Consortium, National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

**GA:** You worked on this film for a long time?

**WG:** Well, yes, see because we actually rough-cut eighteen hours of film on Bunche's life. First we did six hours of this long version in fine cut, then fine-cut another four hours, and each time we had to take the thing apart and put it back together again. There were enormous problems in getting the financing for these different stages, and then finally we couldn't get the completion funds for a PBS airing unless we cut the Bunche story down to two hours, so we had to squeeze all of this into a two-hour film. Now, what we're doing are these fourteen teaching modules, which are thirty minutes each and they are film productions in and of themselves.

So all in all we've done a total of fifteen completed films on Bunche's life, because Bunche was a tremendous figure in the pantheon of international and national leaders. He was really a superb human being, brilliant and at the same time very much dedicated to humanity—Black, white, green. He was a real role model for all human beings. So we're now doing production on various facets of his life—fourteen different facets of his life, most of which didn't appear in the two-hour PBS TV special. The miniproductions will be useful for teachers in universities, colleges and high schools.

So working on this project has been an awesomely arduous, difficult, painful, frustrating experience, and unless you have the commitment—the psychological, psycho-spiritual commitment—to the subject matter you're working on, it can be very painful and destructive to your health and everything else. As you say, I've been around in this thing for quite a long time. But because my psycho-spiritual center is not in making some executive in Hollywood happy by bringing in a lot of profits from a silly film—and I'm not disparaging people who do that—but I'm just simply saying that's not where I come from. Where I'm coming from is the psycho-spiritual liberation of people of color and the psycho-spiritual liberation of the white community as well. That's what I'm all about. [Laughs]

So I have more energy to deploy in that area, because I don't feel I'm prostituting myself by doing something because it pays a lot of money. Mind you, I love money and all of that too. [Laughs] Don't misunderstand me, but I like to make money doing what I want to do rather than what someone else wants me to do. Maybe that's an aberration, but I don't think so.

**GA:** Was it challenging doing the Bunche documentary from a book, making an adaptation?

**WG:** No, the book was very, very helpful. Without Sir Brian Urquhart's book [of the same title] I would not have been able to have done this film as well as it is done. I could have done the film, but it would not have had the kind of scholarship that is invested in it, and then, of course, I had twelve scholars working with us too. But Brian Urquhart was Bunche's closest friend and colleague, and his replacement as Under Secretary General of the United Nations. When I showed the film to Kofi Annan and his executive suite saw the film, they freaked out. Annan said, "This is a film on one of our heroes. It's got to be seen by everyone in the U.N. system and beyond." So he said, "I want this film to be shown at the major U.N. facilities and agencies throughout the world." We gave the U.N. 117 prints of the film, and it's now traveling around the country under the umbrella of the Human Rights Watch Festival in roughly twenty-five cities. My company is distributing it to schools, colleges, universities, libraries and special-interest groups, because another interesting part of my life as a filmmaker, an independent filmmaker, is that because of the racism and apartheid nature of this country when I started out I couldn't get my films shown. I said, "Well, screw these folks, I'm going to distribute it myself," which is what I began doing, and I'm glad that I did. I have only racism to thank for that, because it's made me much more self-reliant in the sense of the Booker T. Washington tradition, I guess. I have been able, with the help of my wife Louise, who is in charge of our distribution area, to get our films out there to all these different film libraries, universities, et cetera.

**GA:** You've also distributed films by other producers and directors. Tell me about that.

**WG:** Well, Gil Noble, who I think very highly of, is a wonderful film producer. He actually has a television show (*Like It Is*), and he gave me one or two of his films—*Fannie Lou Hamer* is one—to distribute. He was going to give me more but then decided to change direction. He wanted to put his films out in another context, but he hasn't gotten that going yet. I may end up distributing more of his stuff, because we're still very good friends and respect each other's work. But we haven't distributed that much work of other filmmakers. We did distribute one called *Witness to Apartheid* by Sharon Sopher, but unfortunately we're not a big enough distributor to take on other people's films. At some point we probably will.

**GA:** Tell me about your film *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* and what inspired you to do it?

**WG:** It came about as a result of my interest in mysticism, science, philosophy and creativity. It's a mix of all those different disciplines. It's very confounding and very difficult to decode. When people see it, they just can't understand it. As a matter of fact, it was shot in 1968 and I finished it

in about 1970, 1971, and we couldn't get it distributed anywhere. The distributors couldn't understand it at all. They didn't know what it was all about, and one astute critic seemed to understand it. He said, "This is so advanced in its thinking that it won't be marketable until thirty or forty years from now," and sure enough, the goddamn film now is moving inexorably into a marketable position.

It's been at about fifteen international film festivals, and the Sundance Channel acquired it and is showing it. Also, Steve Buscemi, Steven Soderbergh and I are planning to do a sequel of it if we can get the financing. Steve Buscemi was at Sundance when it was shown there, and it was a big success at Sundance.

**GA:** He fell in love with it.

**WG:** He did, he really did.

**GA:** You've been very successful outside of the Hollywood system, but you did executive-produce a very funny and successful Hollywood film, *Bustin' Loose*, starring Richard Pryor. How did you get involved with that project?

**WG:** Well, I was one of several Black producers approached by MCA New Ventures, which was a subsidiary of MCA, a sister company to Universal Pictures. They were supposed to be helping Black productions, so they asked my company to take on a project called *Heaven Is a Playground*. We developed it and everything, but the bottom line is that we never got the financing for the film, but the management team at Universal, especially Ned Tanen, who was the president, were impressed with the way in which I conducted the whole project and offered me *Bustin' Loose* to executive-produce.

They also wanted me to come on staff there, which I turned down because by then I had my own company and I had my own freedom of action to do the films that you've seen. That to me seemed more of where I was coming from than to go to Los Angeles and become a Hollywood producer. The stuff that one does out there has a short shelf life; it's a big deal for a few months, then it's gone and it usually has no lasting nourishing, psychological or social impact over a protracted period of time. But our films [William Greaves Productions] are practically indestructible. From *These Roots* was done in 1974, *First World Festival* in 1968. They are constantly being used by the academic and special-interest communities. They certainly have a long shelf life.

And the *Bunche* film is going to be around for fifty years. My feeling is that an advocacy film or a film that's an educational tool or a social-force film can do the work of a major advocacy organization like the NAACP or any of these organizations if the film is strong enough. You see

this very starkly in *Birth of a Nation*, which was able to mobilize public thinking with respect to the African American in a very significant way. All of these various right-wing and racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan couldn't have achieved that level of impact without the help of that evil film.

**GA:** Given the power of film and the fact that more African Americans are using it as technology advances, why don't we see more people using it that way to empower and as a means to effect social change?

**WG:** Well, I think it has to do with society as a whole. It's not only Black people, it's white people, it's all people in modern society and particularly as modern society is being promoted in America. There is a tendency in America to denigrate intellectual development and education and to gravitate towards instant gratification of sensationalist media. Violence, sex, comedy, all that silliness. It's Roman circus time. It's very much Roman circus time. So when you're involved in the circus you don't have time for intellectual and political, sociological and cultural development. So that's the problem, and the Black community is the victim of this dynamic, as is the white community and the Latino community, and all communities in America are in the grip of this media—not disease but epidemic [Laughs]—the epidemic of the media. The media is in epidemic mode, creating diseases of the mind of all kinds. It's polluting the mind in a variety of ways, and most people are not aware of it. And unhappily, most Black media people are not aware of it. I don't know what to say about it other than the fact that not only are most Black media people not aware of it, but most white media people and most Latino media people, and most Asian, are not aware of it.

**GA:** [Laughs] It's a societal problem, you're saying?

**WG:** It's a society-wide problem and people who are conscious in this society—Black or white and all other in between—are very disturbed by what I'm talking about because they can see that it's true, and this media pathology can be very dangerous to the society. It becomes almost a national security problem to have a society that is silly, immature and dysfunctional. [Laughs] Such a society can be very vulnerable to all kinds of destruction both from within and without.

**GA:** We have events like September 11 and everyone's caught off guard and surprised, but the day before some of the hottest stuff on the news was about which celebrity is getting married or something trivial like that. We feed our brains with all this stuff as if it's really important, so when the terrorism that's been cooking all along occurs, we're blown away by it.

**WG:** You've got that right. You stated it very, very acutely, very clearly. It was the long arm of a very hostile reality knocking over those trade towers, and we Americans, especially white Americans, were totally unprepared for that.

**GA:** Yes, because we've been so caught up with what movie's going to open number one at the box office.

**WG:** Yeah, yeah.

**GA:** Having been an actor and a member of the highly selective and prestigious Actors Studio, how has your acting training prepared you as a director?

**WG:** Oh, it's been marvelous—the core of acting, the capacity to empathize with characters and the human condition and the human animal and so on. My work with actors is very strong, largely as a result of my work at the Actors Studio and being trained by Lee Strasberg. Also, I'm constantly being prepared as a director, because I teach acting and I've done it for quite a number of decades. I have moderated some of the sessions when Strasberg was out making a movie or something like that. I also taught acting for the screen at the Lee Strasberg Institute up until his death. I was one of the five or six people who would substitute for Strasberg in running the sessions at the Actors Studio, and I still teach there from time to time. So managing actors and directing actors is a skill that I long ago developed, and if you saw some of my directing you would see the effects of that training.

**GA:** Would you like to do more feature film work?

**WG:** I'd love to do more feature films—I've only done four, but I'd love to do more. But it's very difficult to raise money for these things, and getting people to finance films that are on the wavelength of the things that I've been talking to you about. Paul Robeson, Jr., and I tried for about seven years to get the money to make a film about his father's life. I tried very hard to get money to do Langston Hughes's *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, which is a very wonderful story written by Langston Hughes and Roy De Carava.

**GA:** The great photographer.

**WG:** Right. So Roy and Langston got together and did this book and I got hold of the book through Liska March at the Actors Studio and turned it into a screenplay. Langston read the screenplay and was very excited about it, and Roy was too. I took it up to the Sundance Lab and worked on it with Robert Redford, Paul Newman, Karl Malden, James Brooks, and they were all very excited to do the film, but I couldn't raise the money. The Hollywood studios wouldn't back it.

**GA:** It all comes down to the money.

**WG:** Yes, because *Sweet Flypaper of Life* dealt with the rehabilitation of a young Black man in Harlem by his grandmother, and it was a very compassionate piece. And that didn't seem important to the moguls of the media in Hollywood. I really would like to do that film.

**GA:** What's the general challenge in doing documentary films and getting people to really appreciate them?

**WG:** Consciousness raising. The American audience is very down on education and media, and particularly documentaries. Let me put it this way: Documentaries are becoming more popular in a way, but the more popular they become the more trivial, even silly they also get. [Laughs] So we're caught between a rock and a hard place.

**GA:** What are some of the types of documentaries that you find silly?

**WG:** What you see on the History Channel or Biography. It's better than nothing. I'd rather see them on the screen than some of the other stuff. But when you turn off the set you almost say, "Well, what was that all about?" I don't think you have that reaction when you see *Ida B. Wells* or the *Bunche* film. You say, "Gee, I'm going to read the newspapers more carefully. I'm going to get involved with social reform movements," et cetera.

**GA:** You talked about directing in an article by Maria San Filippo in *Senses of Cinema* on Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, and you said, "My problem is to get out of nature's way and let nature tell her story. That's what a good director does." Can you elaborate?

**WG:** The whole business of the creative spirit—I don't want to get into the mystical aspect—the creative process is a very tricky phenomenon. Much of it turns on intuition, impulse, inspiration, spontaneous response in the formulation of a work of art. The good director respects and encourages these dynamics in the actors and other artistic workers that he assembles to execute his vision of a scene. The good director is ever on the lookout for these qualities and gives actors and other film artists the freedom to spontaneously tap these hidden reservoirs of inspiration when they appear from the hidden depths of the subconscious, which is the genius part of the actor's craft. So this business of "getting out of one's way" really is spontaneously allowing yourself to respond to these various gifts of nature from the subconscious that leads to a kind of freshness, a creative freshness, which is what you want as both a director and an actor, and it's hard to get an actor to be like that, because most actors and directors are into too much control. They control their behavior and they don't give their own spirit and/or those of their coworkers the freedom to be creative, truly creative!

**GA:** There's a lot of censorship.

**WG:** Exactly, precisely, and that tendency to control makes the performance stiff, not fresh and predictable, to an audience watching.

**GA:** Out of all your films, of which one are you most proud—which is your greatest achievement?

**WG:** Right now it's Ralph Bunche. But the films I've done have stood the test of time very well—From *These Roots*, *Ida B. Wells*, *Black Power*. I have quite a few films, but I'm really more excited about Ralph Bunche right through here than I am about any of the others, although I recognize that they were very good. I'm fascinated with *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, because it's a very daring leap into the unknown, in terms of what we're talking about—this whole thing about creativity and spontaneity, letting things happen by themselves. It's such a creative film because the creator of the film has decided not to be a meddler in human nature and behavior, has decided to let the event unfold in and of itself out of the basic circumstances that he has devised. So it's a *tour de force*, and if you see the film, you will see how the crew gets furious with me because I won't control them. Because I've given them so much freedom—too much, they complain. It's beyond the traditional, conventional notion of improvisation for an actor. And, well, you read the Maria San Filippo article. She does a very good job in sort of capturing that aspect.

**GA:** What advice would you give to someone looking to break into film right now, especially into documentaries?

**WG:** The only thing I can think of that really makes sense is that making movies is so hard, so tough that you damn well better make sure that you're making a film about something that you really and truly care about. Unless you have that passion at the core center of your interest in a particular project, if it's something that you really have a burning need to put out there in the form of a film, you're in danger of making a lousy film. If you make a lousy film, they're not going to throw money at you to make another lousy film. The whole business of making a film requires long hours each day, energy deployed working out creative, artistic, philosophical solutions, narrative solutions, a myriad of solutions that have to do with audience response, the politics of the community and all of that. You have to go through all of that plus the business of managing and looking at this stuff and retaining it in your head, and unless you really care, you're not tapping into your genius, because your genius comes from your subconscious, your emotional life, all of those things over which you're not much in control, but nonetheless energize and cause you to think and clarify and reason, with inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning and all kinds of thought processes. And unless you're powered by that burning core need to reveal the truth of



what it is you're feeling, my advice is to forget it because you'll just do crappy films and they won't achieve much, maybe an ulcer, or some other psychosomatic complaint.

Occasionally, a person who is poorly motivated may end up doing something very exciting, but it's largely a fluke. It'll happen once, but it won't happen over and over again. The higher batting average comes from your level of commitment. The Tiger Woods effect, the early Marlon Brando effect, the Jessye Norman effect, the Michael Jordan effect, Ali, all those people are very, very energized and committed to what they're doing. What I'm talking about, I guess, is what Stanislavski and Strasberg would call the use of genius, the liberation of genius in a particular mode of activity, human activity, whether it's filmmaking or sports or whatever. If you can connect with the thing that really matters to you in that particular area, then you've got a chance to succeed.

**GA:** We started our talk discussing history, and that being a critical factor in your life in terms of the stories you tell. Do you think that history could be critical to other Black filmmakers in terms of broadening their understanding of who they are as a people and the types of stories they tell?

**WG:** I think it would help tremendously if they studied their history, because they would find out that two, three, five, ten, fifteen, twenty thousand years ago the Africans, especially the Ethiopians and the ancient Egyptians, were very much involved in the business of human evolution and the civilizing activities of the human animal and they would become progressively, I would say, inspired and proud of their heritage and would understand the obscenity of the kind of position in which we not only find ourselves but are constantly being attempted by others to keep us in this secondary subservient position in the world. A lot of progress has been made in this country. There's no question about it, and as a matter of fact, I would have never come back to America if it had not been developing along democratic lines as a society, and it certainly has been more than most societies on the face of the Earth, but having said that, it still has a way to go. Especially today, when winds that are hostile to the human spirit are gaining ferocity. Learning not only African but history in general would be very, very useful for any of these young people. Charles C. Seifert, the man who started the Charles C. Seifert Ethiopian History Library in Harlem, said, "A race without a knowledge of its history is like a tree without roots." It's true.

So I would say to other Black filmmakers and those of other oppressed people, what you want to do is get to the roots of your culture so that your creations can flower and make life beautiful in a sense not only for yourself but for the people in general. That's my thought in a nutshell. Know who you are. As Shakespeare says, "To thine own self be true." Somehow or another I feel that we need to have people in the media who understand what the media is all about. I regret to

say that most of the media people we have in film and in other media are not aware of how central and pivotal they can be either to the psychological and spiritual liberation of people of African descent or all people of color, for that matter. And realistically speaking, most white people themselves are enslaved by the media and aren't aware of it and need to be liberated from the adverse negative impact of what purports to be positive educational and mass media.

**GA:** Explain what you mean by your statement that people of color and white people are enslaved.

**WG:** A lot of white people labor under the delusion that they are superior to Black people, and that's a slave mentality because they've been trained to think that way, and as a result it interferes with their efficient relationships—more productive and creative relationships—with people of color here in America and worldwide. America suffers in terms of a genius pool of intellects like Ralph Bunche, who can help this country become that center of a golden age for the world. People like Ralph Bunche can help turn this country into something extremely positive. It's positive enough in many respects, but it constantly needs reminding of its creed, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence. It needs to be constantly returned to that source. This is something that we as a people have been constantly moving the country towards, its creed, and the fact that it should live out as fully as possible the tenets, the dictates of the American creed and the Declaration of Independence.

If there was less prejudice, less racism and all of that in this society you would get a bigger contribution by African Americans, Latinos and so on, and you'd get a much bigger contribution to the country by women, for that matter. Women still have problems in second-class citizenship in a way. You get a much richer society in terms of the genius of all these different groups being much more liberated than they are at present. So when I say that whites as well as Blacks are enslaved, they are buying into, very often, this notion of superiority and it's very counterproductive.