

CONTEMPORARY *B*lack *B*iography

Profiles from the International Black Community

Volume 123



GALE
CENGAGE Learning®

Farmington Hills, Mich • San Francisco • New York • Waterville, Maine
Meriden, Conn • Mason, Ohio • Chicago

Advisory Board

Emily M. Belcher

*General and Humanities Reference Librarian
Firestone Library, Princeton University*

Fuller E. Callaway

*Professor of History Emeritus
Morehouse College*

Dr. Ronald Woods

*Professor, African American Studies Program
Eastern Michigan University*

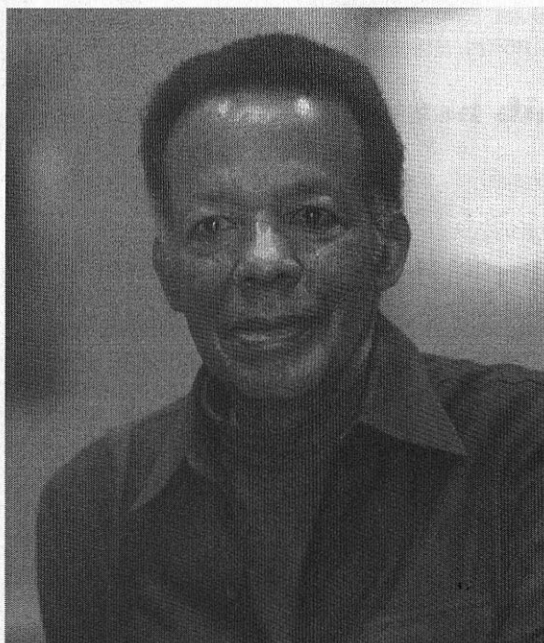
William Greaves

1926–2014

Filmmaker, producer, director, actor

Veteran filmmaker William Greaves produced more than 200 documentary films, many of them about important African-American historical figures such as Ralph Bunche, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X. In doing so, Greaves not only worked to dispel stereotypes and raise awareness of the role of blacks in American history but also became a pioneer within the industry—when Greaves began making films in the 1950s, very few African Americans were involved in any aspect of movie making. During his lifetime he was widely considered to be the leading black documentary filmmaker in the United States. Although he produced four feature films, including *Bustin' Loose* (1981) starring Richard Pryor and Cicely Tyson, Greaves preferred making documentaries “because of their role in consciousness-raising and as an advocacy instrument,” he said, according to a 2002 interview with David Pitts on the website of the U.S. Department of State. “They also tend to have a longer shelf life.”

Greaves was born on October 8, 1926, and raised in Harlem, New York. He was one of seven children of Garfield Greaves, a West Indian immigrant, cab driver, and sometime minister, and his wife Emily. He earned



Greaves, William, photograph. Nick Wall/Getty Images.

scholarships to attend Greenwich Village's Little Red Schoolhouse and Stuyvesant High School and was competitive in boxing, basketball, and track. He studied art and was in the top 10 percent of his class at Stuyvesant, a top-ranked science high school. His upbringing helped foster his hunger for success. “You could say [I had] a very neurotic need to succeed,” he said in a 2001 interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*. “I prefer to think of it as a burning need to exceed my past work ... I just come from a family that treasured and valued achievement.” He studied engineering at City College of New York until joining the Pearl Primus Dance Troupe. He also worked in radio and as a model, and he wrote more than 100 songs recorded by artists such as Eartha Kitt and Al Hibbler.

Went from Actor to Documentary Director

Greaves got his start in the film industry in front of the camera. He was a professional actor on television, in film, and on Broadway from 1946 to 1952. He first appeared as an actor at the American Negro Theater

At a Glance . . .

Born William Greaves on October 8, 1926, in New York, NY; died on August 25, 2014, in New York, NY; son of Garfield (a cab driver and minister) and Emily (Muir) Greaves; married Louise Archambault, 1959; children: David, Taiyi, Maiya. *Education:* Studied at New School of Social Research and Actors Studio, 1948; City College of New York, 1949–51; New Institute for Film and Television, 1950.

Career: Stage, radio, television, and screen actor, 1943–52; Canadian Drama Studio, founder and director, 1952–63; National Film Board of Canada, film production staff, 1952–60; United Nations International Civil Aviation Organization, public information officer, 1962–63, writer, producer, 1965–66; United Nations Television, producer and director, 1963–68; National Educational Television, executive producer, scriptwriter, host of *Black Journal* television series, 1968–71; William Greaves Productions, Inc., founder and president, 1964–2014; Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute, drama teacher, from 1973; Actors Studio, teacher.

Memberships: Actors' Equity Association; American Federation of Television and Radio Artists; American Guild of Authors and Composers; Directors Guild of America; National Association of Black Media Producers; New York Actors Studio; Screen Actors Guild; Writers Guild of America.

Awards: American Film Festival Award, 1964, for *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class*; Silver Medal, International Film and Television Festival, 1969; Atlanta International Film Festival Award, Chicago International Film Festival Award, and Randy Award, Job Film Fair Competition, all 1969, for *In the Company of Men*; Emmy Award, 1970, for *Black Journal*; Oscar Micheaux Award, Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, 1980; Indy Special Life Achievement Award, Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers.

and later played the lead role in the stage production of Lee Shubert's *A Young American*. In 1949 he was a featured actor in the hit Broadway musical *Lost in the Stars*. On the big screen he was part of the all-black cast of the 1948 feature film *Miracle in Harlem* and the next year appeared in *The Fight Never Ends*, which starred heavyweight boxing champion Joe

Louis. Greaves joined the renowned Actors Studio, but he was frustrated by the limited range of stereotypical roles available to black actors at the time.

Greaves gave up on acting and left the United States in the 1950s to work behind the scenes on the production staff of the National Film Board of Canada. He worked manual labor jobs to make a living while apprenticing there and worked his way up to writing and directing assignments. For eight years he worked as an editor, writer, and director on more than 80 National Film Board productions. Among Greaves's Canadian films was *Emergency Ward*, a reality-style documentary that was filmed entirely in a Montreal hospital and aired in Canada in 1958.

Because his work was rarely broadcast beyond Canada, Greaves was virtually unknown when he returned to the United States in the early 1960s. American avant-garde filmmaker Shirley Clarke saw *Emergency Ward* and recommended Greaves to the head of the film division of the United States Information Agency (USIA), a branch of the U.S. Department of State dedicated to public diplomacy. Working out of the United Nations headquarters in New York, Greaves made documentaries for the USIA such as *Wealth of a Nation* (1964) and *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966). The latter film captured the landmark event, which took place in Dakar, Senegal, and celebrated the artistic achievement of Africans, both in Africa and in the African diaspora. The film featured performances by such leading African-American artists as composer Duke Ellington, choreographers Alvin Ailey and Katherine Dunham, and poet Langston Hughes. Greaves was also executive producer and cohost of the groundbreaking public affairs series *Black Journal*, which appeared on network television from 1968 to 1970. Greaves won an Emmy award for his work on the show in 1970.

Poured Soul into Bunche Documentary

Greaves founded his own film company, William Greaves Productions, in New York City in 1964, after which he wrote, directed, and produced dozens of award-winning documentaries. *From These Roots* is an in-depth social, political, and cultural exploration of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The film aired on PBS and NBC in 1974, won 22 film festival awards, and is considered a classic in African-American history studies. Nearly 30 years after its release, the show was still being broadcast on television in the United States and abroad. Greaves also wrote, directed, and produced *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989), which was part of the PBS television series *The American Experience*; narrated by Nobel Prize-winning writer Toni Morrison, it won more than 20 film festival awards and was nominated for a 1990 NAACP Image Award. *In the Company of Men* earned eight

film festival awards. Among Greaves's most successful films were *Still a Brother Inside: The Negro Middle Class* (1968), *Booker T. Washington: The Life and Legacy* (1983), *Frederick Douglass: An American Life* (1984), and *Black Power in America: Myth or Reality?* (1987). "Not every Greaves film is an under-appreciated gem," wrote a *Christian Science Monitor* critic in 1991, but "his best films ... are models of their genres."

In February of 2001, Greaves saw the national broadcast of one of his proudest works, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. Bunche was an African-American diplomat who served as under-secretary general of the United Nations, becoming the first person of color to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Bunche was scorned by blacks and political radicals, who considered him a traitor for working with the white-dominated political establishment. Greaves, however, painted a portrait of Bunche as a catalyst for change. "Bunche was a master at conflict resolution," Greaves told Pitts on the State Department website. "He was the Michael Jordan of his day in terms of international diplomacy, and was very much involved in the emerging civil rights movement in America as well." An even more compelling motivation for making the film, Greaves said, was that Bunche "was famous at the time; then he disappeared. I wanted to bring him back."

The Bunche documentary was a tremendous undertaking for Greaves, who spent 10 years making the film. "Making this film ... was an odyssey in itself," Greaves said in a 2001 interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*. He had to pore through mountains of texts, photographs, and newsreel footage and contact hundreds of foundations and corporations to secure funding for the project. At one point, he appealed to comedian Bill Cosby and his wife Camille to pay for one hour of the show. The film's rough cut ran 17 hours. Greaves, his wife (the film's coproducer), and several editors underwent an agonizing editing process to bring it down to four hours. Greaves was then informed by the broadcaster, PBS, that he would have to cut the final version down to just two hours. Greaves conducted all of the interviews in the film, which was narrated by Oscar-winning African-American actor Sidney Poitier. The film was shown in competition at the Sundance Film Festival and won gold awards from two international festivals. Greaves told Freda Warren of the *Christian Science Monitor* that he hoped the film would be "a persuader and a motivator for social commitment."

Worked on Feature Films

Although Greaves preferred documentaries, he also worked on four feature films. He was executive producer of *Bustin' Loose*, starring Richard Pryor and Cicely Tyson. He also wrote, directed, and produced three other features, including *Ali, the Fighter* (1971), starring prizefighters Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier,

and *The Marijuana Affair* (1975), which featured Calvin Lockhart and Ingrid Wang.

Greaves made his *cinéma vérité* feature *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* in New York City during the summer of 1968. He assembled a cast of acting students from the Actors Studio and shot the film entirely on location in Central Park. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is a blend of narrative, experimental, and documentary filmmaking. The film is a "film-outside-of-a-film"—that is, the story of a tyrannical film director (played by Greaves) being filmed by an outside documentary crew while filming his own movie. Greaves gave the actors only a loose idea of the plot, used handheld cameras with minimal crew and natural lighting, and tried to capture the realities of life itself rather than the forged realities of a narrative feature. "The film had to be chaos, but chaos of a very special character: intelligible." Greaves said in an interview posted on his website (WilliamGreaves.com). "It had to have a classic flow of some kind. It had to hold your attention, even though it was supposed to be a lousy film." The result is a biting witty movie that centers on an unraveling marriage.

This avant-garde feature was highly acclaimed but enjoyed little to no popular success. Actor and director Steve Buscemi took on the promotion of the film as his pet project, and it enjoyed renewed interest in the 1990s. It was then shown at numerous film festivals, including Sundance, Munich, San Sebastian, Sydney, Paris, Graz, Göteborg, Denver, the Hamptons, and Lake Placid, New York. The film finally was released in 2005. At the same time, Greaves, with the help of filmmaker Steven Soderbergh and Buscemi, released *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2*, a sequel to the original film that incorporated unseen footage as well as new scenes of the film's actors engaged in the project of being directed by "William Greaves" 35 years later.

Garnered Numerous Awards and Honors

Although he spent most of his career behind the camera, Greaves remained involved with the Actors Studio. He was honored, along with actors Robert De Niro, Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, and others, with the Actors Studio's first Dusa Award in 1980. From 1969 to 1982 he substituted occasionally for the late Lee Strasberg as moderator at the Actors Studio and taught acting at the Strasberg Theatre Institute in New York. He also remained involved as a member of the Actors Studio's board of directors and auditioning committee, and he moderated sessions there.

Of his 200-plus documentary films, seven have earned more than 70 international film festival awards, an Emmy Award, and four Emmy nominations. In 1980

he was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame and received a special tribute at the first Black American Independent Film Festival in Paris. He also was awarded an "Indy," the Special Life Achievement Award of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers.

When he was starting out in the film business, Greaves recalled to Freda Warren of the *Christian Science Monitor*, "I thought I was going to be a hurricane, but I ended up becoming ... merely a single raindrop falling on a stone. But hopefully there are other raindrops of similar mind impacting this stone, this intractable humanity. And over time ... this [human condition] will change."

Major retrospectives of the filmmaker's work have been held at the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum in New York. The Brooklyn show, *William Greaves: Chronicler of the African-American Experience*, ran in 1991 and, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, presented Greaves as a "black film pioneer [who] made his way into the white-dominated movie world and blazed an amazing number of racial, artistic, and cinematic trails." Greaves died at his home in Manhattan on August 25, 2014, at age 87.

Selected works

Films

- Emergency Ward*, National Film Board of Canada, 1958.
Wealth of a Nation, United States Information Agency, 1964.
The First World Festival of Negro Arts, United States Information Agency, 1966.
Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class, NET, 1968.
Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One, Take One Productions, 1968.
In the Company of Men, Newsweek, 1969.
Voice of La Raza, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1972.
Power vs. the People, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1973.
Ali, the Fighter, CinAmerica, 1973.
From These Roots, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1974.
The Marijuana Affair, William Greaves Productions, 1975.

- Just Doin' It*, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1976.
Nationtime: Gary, William Greaves Productions, 1977.
In Search of Pancho Villa, Anthony Quinn, 1978.
Where Dreams Come True, NASA, 1979.
Bustin' Loose, Universal Pictures, 1981.
Space for Women, NASA, 1981.
Booker T. Washington: Life and Legacy, National Park Service, 1983.
Frederick Douglass: An American Life, National Park Service, 1984.
Beyond the Forest, Indian Red Cross, 1985.
Golden Goa, Government of India, 1985.
Black Power in America: Myth or Reality?, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1987.
The Deep North, WCBS, 1988.
Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice, PBS, 1989.
Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey, PBS, 2001.
Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take 2 1/2, Criterion, 2005.

Sources

Periodicals

- Christian Science Monitor*, April 24, 1991; February 21, 2001, p. 15.
Cineaste, March 2001, pp. 35-37.
New York Times, August 26, 2014.
Washington Post, August 27, 2014.

Online

- "About William Greaves," PBS.org, http://www.pbs.org/ralphbunche/filmmaking_about.html (accessed December 17, 2014).
Murray, Noel, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One," AV Club, January 3, 2007, <http://www.avclub.com/review/symbiopsychotaxiplasm-take-one-8020> (accessed December 17, 2014).
Pitts, David, "William Greaves, Pioneering African-American Filmmaker," U.S. Department of State, February 26, 2002, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2005/06/20050606085813pssnikwad0.6059381.html#axzz3MAy83Pbh> (accessed December 17, 2014).
William Greaves Productions, <http://www.williamgreaves.com> (accessed December 23, 2002).

—Brenna Sanchez and Kay Eastman