

Ralph Bunche Reconsidered: An Interview with William Greaves

by Freda Warren



Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey, a new documentary by veteran filmmaker William Greaves, offers a revisionist view of the achievements of Ralph Bunche. Most activists of the Sixties perceived Bunche as a conservative figure who was reluctant to take an active part in civil-rights struggles and who feared to publicly oppose the war in Vietnam because it would alienate the White House. That McCarthyites had considered Bunche a dangerous radical seemed ludicrous to them. After years of research, Greaves has come to the conclusion that the right wingers, rather than the radicals, had a better sense of Bunche's impact.

In *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, he posits that Bunche was a radical activist who chose to work within the power structure. This bold appraisal emerges from a rich interplay of newsreel footage, quotations from Bunche's writing, and input from colleagues, scholars, and activists. The most important of these is Sir Brian Urquhart, former Undersecretary-General at the U.N., and author of an important biography of Bunche. Central to the film's reconception of Bunche's political image is a look at the years he taught at Howard when he was on the cutting edge of African-American radicalism. Also critical is an examination of the influence of the Bunche family.

The project has taken almost ten years to complete. The first rough cut came to seventeen hours, but Greaves reduced it to six hours, hoping to get interest from the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) for a special series. When this did not materialize, he was forced to cut the film to its present two hours. The two-hour cut was not arrived at overnight, but in several discrete stages. In order to secure funding to complete the film, Greaves was told by a major funder that only partial funding would be available to him and only if the film's length was reduced to four hours. When he tried to secure the balance of the funding for the four-hour length from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, he was told that completion funds would be available only for a two-hour film.

Greaves states that cutting from four hours to two was an excruciating experience for himself, his wife Louise (the coproducer), and several editors. At one point, Greaves appealed to Bill and Camille Cosby for help to pay for the cost of an extra hour in the hope that the completion funder would agree to a three-hour version if the extra hour was fully funded. The funder, however, felt that because Bunche no longer had any name recognition, the "casual TV viewer" even of PBS programming

would not be willing to spend more than two hours, if that, looking at a program about Ralph Bunche. Four separate rough cuts of the film were made in order to finally produce the two-hour film that will air on PBS. Greaves feels much important material had to be omitted and plans to produce a series of independent modules from material that had to be cut from the longer version. These would be primarily for classroom use, but he hopes that they will eventually be part of the mini-series on Bunche he intends to produce.

Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey, was selected to compete in the documentary section of this year's Sundance Film Festival. It is also scheduled to be screened at the Library of Congress and has been given preview screenings at the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, the United Nations, and on the campuses of several universities. One of these was the University of Oklahoma, whose faculty includes Ben Keppel, an advisor to the project who is also interviewed in the film. During his stay at the campus, William Greaves was interviewed for *Cineaste* by Freda Warren.—**Dan Georgakas**

Cineaste: What brought about your interest in Ralph Bunche?

William Greaves: Several things. When I was a young actor in New York, he came backstage at a Broadway production of *Lost in the Stars*, a musical based on *Cry the Beloved Country*. Todd Duncan was the star and I had a featured role. Bunche brought Jawaharlal Nehru, Krishna Menon, and other world leaders backstage after the show. I was impressed that he wanted to share the black experience with these famous persons. Later, I worked as a producer/director at the U.N. in New York in the film and television section, and I became much more aware of Bunche. However, by this time, although he was an international civil servant working very productively at the United Nations, a lot of black people wondered whether he was just an Uncle Tom. They bought into the criticism levelled at Bunche by the 1960s radicals who thought he was busy hanging out with all those mainstream white people. My own belief was somewhat similar until I finally realized what his covert agenda was. Bunche was busy working for the uplift of humanity on the inside. He knew that the Soviets and the Chinese were beating the drum in terms of the liberation of Third World peoples and, of course, the destruction of the European colonial empires and that unless



Ralph Bunche at a January 1963 press conference in Leopoldville, Republic of Congo (UN Photo).

America got into the decolonization game at the U.N., it would leave an open field for all its Cold War rivals. So he helped to draft those sections of the U.N. Charter that helped to speed up the decolonization of the world.

Working closely with his good friend Eleanor Roosevelt, he helped to bring attention to humanitarian and human-rights issues worldwide. These kinds of activities of Bunche—decolonization, human rights, and so on—brought international pressure to bear on the American body politics and was one of the main reasons why America's Establishment embraced the civil-rights

movement. Bunche played an important role in making it possible for these forces to have a positive effect on domestic policy in America. He also appreciated the 'good side' of America, the fact that Americans think of themselves as decent, democratic people who want to live up to the ideals of the American creed as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. This does not take anything away from the important work of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, or the other civil-rights leaders, but, for my money, Bunche is an equal and perhaps more important figure in the struggle for civil and human rights. Marching, singing "We Shall Overcome," and holding hands and that sort of thing is wonderful, but putting in place on a worldwide level, structural and legal principles for self-determination, conflict resolution, and global human rights, is fundamental stuff.

Human rights are now established as criteria for judging nations throughout the world, including America. Bunche was critical to that Declaration being endorsed by the U.N. General Assembly in Oslo and Paris. Bunche is hot stuff. He was the consummate insider activist. He most resembles those guys who put together the American Constitution, most of whom were very libertarian in the John Stuart Mills sense. Bunche is part of that tradition of insiders who have fostered democratic principles and institutions. Of course, the Constitution itself was hardly ideal and it took people like George Mason to lead the struggle for the first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights. Don't get me started on Ralph Bunche, I could go on and on about him!

Cineaste: Does your commitment to documentaries lie in the notion that you can reveal a stronger dose of truth than possible in traditional feature films?

Greaves: You can say important things in feature films, but typically, backers of feature films are not primarily interested in social messages. There are notable exceptions of course, films like *Gentleman's Agreement*, *Home of the Brave*, and *Lost Boundaries*. They came out right after the end of World War II. The Nazis had just been defeated and everybody thought the world had learned a lesson and was going to be a better place. It's harder to get backing for that kind of feature film now unless you're Spielberg. But you can get backing for a documentary on women's liberation, AIDS, discrimination against immigrants, and even subject matter that deals with the radical changes in a society that are moving millions of young black and Latin men into prison. That was one reason I went into documentary filmmaking. I knew I could do films about this kind of subject and that some funding was available. Having said that, I must emphasize that it is still very difficult to raise money



Ralph Bunche (center) at an October 1948 press conference in Paris (UN Photo).

for films of any kind, even for documentaries.

Cineaste: Was raising funds for the Bunche film somewhat easier, given his prestige and yours?

Greaves: Probably. Nevertheless, it took us years to put it all together. Not just the fundraising but in regard to all the research, scripting, newsreel footage, interviews, newspaper clippings, photos and other documentation we collected. It was not an easy film to make. We're still not finished in terms of the longer version that we want to produce. In the process of making this film we produced four different versions (a two-hour, a three-hour, a four-hour, and a six-

hour) of *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. It kept us busy seven days a week, ten to fourteen hours a day. But thanks to work schedule, we were able to find the funds and create four different versions, in series format, which amounted to fifteen hours of rough fine cuts.

Cineaste: Was part of the difficulty that you wanted to make a long documentary about an African American who was not a typical Sixties-style activist?

Greaves: It's difficult to make long documentaries about any subject for TV. What I can tell you is that at various stages of its development, there was resistance to the series. In some cases, I thought it may have been because Bunche is viewed by some people as being too moderate. At other times I thought it was due to antiprogressive or racist funding agendas of various individuals and institutions. Later, I came to realize that sometimes the project was competing with another worthy project. Certainly, there were reservations about the film's popular appeal. People had forgotten about Bunche. Why bother? And it's true that America, in many ways, is a Kleenex culture that carelessly throws away its history. Now that our film is getting some buzz, some of the people who were opposed to the making of it have become supportive. I am very pleased to have proved the skeptics wrong. You have to develop your talent to a point where you persuade, even force, people to change their attitudes in terms of supporting your projects. If the quality is high enough, your work can force them to change their various presumptions, even prejudices sometimes. That is the miracle of film as an educational tool or a dangerous weapon.

Cineaste: Your work has been described as being supportive of black pride while stopping far short of advocating separatist politics.

Greaves: My films have strong elements of black pride, which are a reaction to white racism, but they are ultimately pointed in the direction of the humanity and dignity of all people. I think that there has been entirely too much emphasis placed on black or white identity. If we allow ourselves to be continually segmented in that way we can't get to the essential humanity that joins us. Either a person is going to be a member of the human race or they are going to be 'black' or 'white.' Unless a sense of common humanity and dignity become dominant, we are in for a lot of trouble in the twenty-first century.

Cineaste: Your work is often shown during Black History Month and events of that kind. Do you think these may have the effect of keeping black films segregated from American film studies and related areas?

Greaves: One of the unhappy features of American society has been a tendency to 'ghettoize' the black achiever by featuring his race. He

or she is described as the finest black person that has come down the pike in some field, rather than that he is the finest person in the field or a fine person in the field. That is one of the problems we were confronting with Ralph Bunche. He had been constantly presented as a black this or a black that, and he was not. He was also a citizen of the world and wanted to be seen as that. Yet another complication of this mindset is the anomaly of all the black students hanging out together on a campus, all the Chinese here, and all the whites over there. This is outrageous. Film offers a fantastic opportunity to really know another people's culture. Why would you come to a university and spend all that money to learn what Plato thought and what Newton taught and not know anything about human beings in the world today who do not happen to come from your particular culture? I get invited to many campuses for all kinds of events. I speak about a variety of subjects that I address in my films—black consciousness, the quality of American life, the nature and various techniques and styles of filmmaking, the problems of working with actors and nonactors. All these are areas of concern and interest me. I tend to not categorize myself, and I hope that is a statement in itself.

Cineaste: You moved behind the camera in 1950 because of what you saw as the demeaning film roles given to African Americans. At the time you were being considered for the very positive role that Sidney Poitier eventually got in *No Way Out*. Do you ever regret not staying with the acting?

Greaves: The attraction of an acting career was not that great for me. Obviously, I could not predict that Sidney would be so successful, as an actor, in breaking barriers. He was a pivotal figure in the alteration of white attitudes and misperceptions on race because the roles he chose were not demeaning, and he made a point of doing that. While I do not regret leaving acting, I'm still fascinated with it and have continued to teach actors. From time to time, I even do a little acting. For example, you will hear my voice in the film in various voice-over roles, but I won't tell you whose lines I read! Sidney and I are good friends, and he agrees that what I do in my films is very important. I am very comfortable with that, and I was pleased that Sidney agreed to do the narration for *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*. He's absolutely perfect as the narrator for this film. I'm fascinated by how expertly and movingly he draws you into the world of Ralph Bunche.

Cineaste: Few universities offer courses on African American films and filmmakers. How is such a problem addressed?

Greaves: Frederick Douglass said it—"Agitate, agitate, agitate." Fortunately, we're in a society that permits dissent. We are able to make noises that affect the direction and quality of life, to bring about reform. So that's what you have to do.

Cineaste: What is your advice to a young black female like myself who wants to write and direct films?

Greaves: If you want to work as an independent in documentaries, my advice is to make sure that your interest is extremely deep because this is a tough field and it is important for you to realize that only people made of strong stuff are going to survive. You've really got to be committed—and passionately so—to advancing the various concerns that you feel are important. When I first started making films, I believed they could be powerful influences for social uplift that would demonstrate how important it was to be civilized, ethical, socially and politically conscious, and so on. I thought my films would have a powerful transforming effect on American society and change it from being the very ugly, racist, apartheidlike environment that I grew up in. I was very idealistic. After many decades of working in the mine fields, I realized that at best my films are just raindrops falling on a stone and only the aggregate of all the raindrops of a good many individuals may eventually succeed in wearing down the stone. Don't expect this to happen overnight. As a filmmaker you must think of yourself as one of many foot soldiers in the struggle to improve the quality of life in America and the rest of the world. ■

For further information on *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, write to William Greaves Productions, Inc., P.O. Box 2044, Radio City Station, New York, NY 10101-2044, phone 1 (800) 874-8314

Liv Ullmann Interview (continued)

Sometimes the actor asks for another take, but this seldom happens.

Cineaste: Some directors exhaust actors by demanding take after take.

Ullmann: I don't understand that. With these actors, it's not necessary. In my experience, I usually find that actors are best on the first take. During the second, they repeat themselves. I did a second take, however, in the scene when Lena is sitting in the window and crying over her child. It was incredible the first time she did it. But it seemed too clever. After the second take, it was amazingly quiet in the studio. Nobody applauded, but when she went out all the technicians congratulated her. The first take was a great performance, but the second one told us what the character was really thinking and feeling. Of course, you have to work with the cinematographer and ensure that she has the best lighting and that no one says 'cut' before I do.

Cineaste: You worked with Sven Nykvist on *Private Confession*. Are there differences between his approach and the choices favored by Jörgen Persson, the man who shot *Faithless*?

Ullmann: Nykvist and I speak the same language—we know each other so well. The man who shot *Faithless* is a great cinematographer, but is more technical and I was sometimes afraid that he'd talk too much. That's fine for him, but if he says, "Move a little, so we'll have more of the tree," the actors don't care. But he was really fantastic.

Cineaste: You also worked with Erland Josephson several times before, having directed him in *Sofie*, as well as acting with him in *Scenes from a Marriage*.

Ullmann: Yes, and we are very close. And if anyone knows Ingmar better than me, it's Erland. They've known each other since they were young. I think what he gives to this person called Bergman—Ingmar said he couldn't think of another name—is enormously touching. He shows us an elderly man who is longing to be kissed one more time, to be held one more time. And, in addition, having the fear of isolation and death.

Cineaste: On the one hand, he has an affinity with David, but also has the wisdom now to realize his folly.

Ullmann: Exactly.

Cineaste: Marianne says to David that, "We have an affinity in our misery," and that seems to be a key line.

Ullmann: Yeah, a lot of people have that. When they've done all of these things together, they're stuck together with their misery. In a way, it's a sad thing to be tied to someone merely because of the misery that you've shared. But that happens a lot. It happened to me. There's nothing in the film that I don't recognize from my life. And a lot of elderly and middle-aged people notice aspects of their own lives here. Maybe, after watching it, they'll be more careful.

Cineaste: So this film expresses your jaundiced view of contemporary society, as well as just marriage?

Ullmann: If we don't have any values anymore, if nothing we do means anything, then we'll end up feeling very gray. In the end, then, love is not important, other people are not important, and even you yourself are not important. When values decline, it takes all the fun out of living.

Cineaste: Have you considered acting in films or on stage again?

Ullmann: No, it's not part of my plan. Actually today somebody called me about a play on Broadway. Even though you say that you'll never act, something will come along to prompt you to say, "Oh my God, that's incredible." I probably won't, but to be offered this was tempting. I feel more fulfilled as a director. The only trouble is that it takes me two years to do a film—one year for preproduction and writing the screenplay, then we shoot the film, and then you travel with it. If you're thirty or forty, that's great. But now, to know that it's two and a half years of your life, you have to choose carefully because you don't want to waste any time. ■