

U.S. Postal Service Honours Pioneering Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux with 2010 Black Heritage Series Stamp



The 33rd stamp in the Black Heritage series, issued in June 2010, honors pioneering filmmaker Oscar Micheaux, who wrote, directed, produced, and distributed more than 40 movies during the first half of the 20th century. An ambitious, larger-than-life figure, Micheaux thrived at a time when African-American filmmakers were rare, venues for their work were scarce, and support from the industry did not exist. Micheaux's entrepreneurial spirit and independent vision continue to inspire new generations of filmmakers and artists.

Born on January 2, 1884, to a farming family in southwestern Illinois, Oscar Micheaux was the fifth of eleven children and the son of two former slaves from Kentucky. Information in his autobiographical novels suggests that when Micheaux was around 17, he headed north by train, paying his way by working as a laborer. After he arrived in Chicago in 1902, he held several jobs before becoming a Pullman Porter and traveling the country by train.

In 1904, Micheaux purchased land in South Dakota and became a homesteader; within a few years he was supervising five farms. In 1911, he published an article in the *Chicago Defender* encouraging African-Americans to go west and seek their fortunes on the frontier, and he soon turned his own experiences in South Dakota into his first novel, *The Conquest* (1913), which is still praised by historians for its eyewitness account of South Dakota homesteading. Ending his time as a homesteader, Micheaux traveled the country selling copies of *The Conquest* and two other novels.

In 1918, Micheaux began writing, directing, and producing his first movie: a big-screen adaptation of his third novel, *The Homesteader* (1917). Combining a love story, a Western, and a dramatic tale of African-American life, *The Homesteader* premiered in Chicago on February 20, 1919, and earned rave reviews in the local press. Drawing on his experiences selling and distributing his novels, Micheaux began his lifelong practice of personally arranging screenings by traveling with prints of his films.

During the 1920s, Micheaux made more than 20 movies. The melodrama *Within Our Gates* (1920) focused on racially motivated mob violence and even included a depiction of a lynching. Micheaux also adapted novels, produced courtroom dramas, and dabbled in autobiography: *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) combined his own homesteading experiences with a tale of romance and racial identity, while *Deceit* (1923) told the story of a filmmaker attacked by censors.

From the start, Micheaux's films were controversial for mocking corrupt preachers or for depicting characters who gambled, drank, took drugs, or used vulgar language. By contrast, Micheaux ensured that his typical heroine was intelligent and strong and that his films advocated hard work and education while condemning the depictions of racism and criminal behavior that often attracted audiences to the theaters.

Descriptions of Micheaux's many lost films hint at their crowd-pleasing nature. *The Dungeon* (1922) reportedly included prophetic dreams, Alaskan claim-jumpers, kidnapping, and political intrigue, while *A Son of Satan* (1924) was a musical comedy about a haunted house. One of Micheaux's few surviving films from the 1920s is *Body and Soul* (1925), which starred Paul Robeson as a corrupt minister. Film historians have praised *Body and Soul* for showcasing Micheaux's directorial talent, technical skills, and sense of humor.

In the late 1920s, Micheaux found himself competing with sound films and slick Hollywood movies for the attention of black audiences. His first picture with full sound was the 1931 film *The Exile*, which was also the first all-black sound film made by a black producer.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Micheaux became the only producer of silent movies for African Americans to make the transition to producing sound pictures as well. He made new sound versions of his earlier silent films, produced several movies about gangsters and the urban underworld, and courted further controversy with *God's Stepchildren* (1938), a depiction of conflict over shades of skin color within the black community.

Micheaux's only film after 1940 was *The Betrayal* (1947), a dramatization of his life story, but prints of his older films appeared in black theaters throughout the decade. In a 1947 letter distributed to theater managers, Micheaux defended his portrayal of the African-American experience: "We want to see our lives dramatized on the screen as we are living it, the same as other peoples, the world over."

Oscar Micheaux died on March 25, 1951, while traveling in Charlotte, North Carolina. Forgotten after his death, Micheaux was rediscovered in the late 1960s by South Dakota historians and in the 1970s by film historians interested in early black cinema. Although only 15 of his movies are known to have survived in whole or in part, Micheaux has become a cinematic icon. In 1986, he was posthumously awarded a special Directors Guild of America award. In 1995, the Producers Guild of America established the Oscar Micheaux Award to honor "an individual or individuals whose achievements in film and television have been accomplished despite difficult odds."

Pioneering filmmaker **Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951)** wrote, directed, produced, and distributed more than 40 movies during the first half of the 20th century, when African-American filmmakers were extremely rare and support for their work was scarce. His entrepreneurial spirit and independent vision continue to inspire new generations of filmmakers and artists.