

Sidney Poitier season – programme notes



In January this year, we lost the great Sidney Poitier – a silver screen icon whose career spanned 60 years and paved the way for generations of Black film stars to come. We're pleased to pay tribute to one of the last major stars of the Hollywood Golden Age by looking back at some of his most iconic, history-making roles from the 1950s and '60s with a season of his films throughout April.

We asked freelance writer, film critic and broadcaster Leila Latif to give us an overview of Poitier's astonishing screen career.

Some people are more than just a sum of their parts, and defining the legacy of actor, director and activist Sidney Poitier by listing his roles wouldn't come close to encompassing how great an impact he had on the world.

Born three months premature to Bahamian tomato farmer parents, Poitier was not delivered into privilege. He grew up on Cat Island, which had no electricity and limited

access to education. As a teenager, he moved first to New York and failed miserably in his first audition for The American Negro Theatre as he was functionally illiterate, tone deaf and had a thick Bahamian accent. Undeterred, he worked with a waiter at a restaurant he was a dishwasher at to learn to read and soften his accent. His self-proclaimed tone deafness remained, and even in his Oscar-winning performance for *Lilies of the Field* his singing had to be dubbed.

After finally joining the theatre he got his first big break as Harry Belafonte's understudy and his rise from Broadway star to movie star was unprecedented. In 1957's film noir *Edge of The City*, Poitier riveted and devastated audiences in equal measure, as dockworker Tommy. Technically a supporting role, Poitier steals the show with what was at the time a milestone in portrayals of Black men on screen. While John Cassavetes is damaged with wavering integrity, Poitier's character is good-natured, reflective and a victim of the cruel world around him. At the time to simply have a film's moral compass be a person of colour was ground-breaking.

He would soon find himself receiving his first Oscar nomination for *The Defiant Ones*, where he played Cullen, an escaped convict shackled to Joker (Tony Curtis), on the run from law enforcement. Cullen would be an almost uncharacteristically brutal role for Poitier, but he is still grounded in his signature warmth. Both he and Curtis elevated the material, with cracks of goodness shining through the character's hardened artifice. Both would lose out on their Oscar nominations to David Niven in potent melodrama *Separate Tables*, but more significant was that Poitier's nomination was the first ever for a Black actor.

Poitier would go on to receive two Academy Awards, one for Lifetime Achievement in 2002, but first would first clasp the golden statuette in 1964 for *Lilies of the Field*, a role that [tone deafness aside] typified his greatest strengths. He played Homer a handyman compelled by a higher sense of purpose to build a group of Nuns a chapel. But his career arguably peaked in 1967 when *To Sir, With Love*; *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and *In The Heat of the Night* were

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released. If Poitier's career was boiled down to a single moment it would probably be the slap in moody murder mystery *In the Heat of The Night* where his character, the brilliant detective Virgil Tibbs immediately returns a slap he gets from racist plantation owner Edicott (Larry Gates). It was a powerful moment that Poitier insisted upon, feeling it was important that Black men weren't shown to always turn the other cheek.

Poitier felt the burden of representation throughout his career, and was committed to not closing the door behind him. As a director, he created roles that shifted the cultural understanding of Black men and women, and as an activist he fought for their rights. It takes an extraordinary amount of talent and ambition for an actor to smash through so many societal expectations. Through the modern lens we can still recognise Poitier's magnetism in any one of his roles, but perhaps can't fully appreciate how revolutionary they were in the context of the time. With his work, he subtly and irrevocably shifted the cultural perception of Blackness and proved the impact that cinema can have on the world around it. He once said that his life goal was more modest, that "If I'm remembered for having done a few good things, and if my presence here has sparked some good energies, that's plenty." Even after his death, his presence on screen, his poise and intelligence still feels tangible, and with everything from the smile of a nun to the landing of a slap still sparking "good energies". – Leila Latif

Leila Latif is a freelance writer, film critic and broadcaster, regularly contributing to Little White Lies, Total Film, Sight and Sound, Radio 4's Front Row, BBC World Service's The Arts Hour, and has appeared in print for The Guardian, BBC Culture, BAFTA and many more.

Screenings for our Sidney Poitier season

Sunday 3 April, 5.15pm
In the Heat of the Night (1967)
Director: Norman Jewison

Thursday 7 April, 10.30am & 1.30pm
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner? (1967)
Director: Stanley Kramer

Sunday 10 April, 1pm
The Defiant Ones (1958)
Director: Stanley Kramer

Sunday 17 April, 3.30pm
Edge of the City (1957)
Director: Martin Ritt

Sunday 24 April, 3pm
Lilies of the Field (1963)
Director: Ralph Nelson

Visit our Box Office or broadway.org.uk/sidneypoitier to book tickets.

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