The AFI FEST Interview: I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO Director Raoul Peck

Description

Raoul Peck joins us in person for the inaugural World Cinema Masters in Conversation section at AFI FEST. He will sit down for an in-depth discussion with Toronto International Film Festival Artistic Director Cameron Bailey at the festivalâ??s screening of I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO.

James Baldwinâ??s unfinished final book â??Remember This Houseâ?• was entrusted to Peck by the writerâ??s estate. Drawing on this precious inheritance, Peck has crafted an incisive, elegant lm essay that examines what it means to be black in America. Narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, the film links racial violence in the 1960s (the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., specifically) to current events surrounding the deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of police, and is edited so that disturbing images spanning almost half a century find even more heightened power together. As a Haitian filmmaker, Peck is able to add an outsiderâ??s viewpoint to the proceedings, while also furthering the idea that the black experience transcends borders and national identities.

AFI: James Baldwinâ??s unfinished final book â??Remember This Houseâ?• was entrusted to you by the writerâ??s estate. Did you feel pressure to do it justice?

Raoul Peck: Because it is rare for any estate to give such access to an authorâ??s body of

Raoul Peck

work, and even more unusual when it is one of the most important authors in modern America, it was less the pressure than the responsibility that laid heavy on my shoulders.

If there was any pressure, it was the self-inflicted pressure to do right by Baldwin â?? to figure how to be faithful to his words, in a world that asked, at every moment, for simple answers to complicated issues. The film industry being what it is, I knew that I only had one shot

I wanted to have Baldwin center-stage, without any talking heads interpreting or second-guessing him. It seems politically urgent to put Baldwinâ??s word â??in the streets,â?• as he would have personally done, and make sure that these words were uncensored, unapologetic, direct and raw. He was to be the message; I just wanted to be the messenger.

AFI: How did Samuel L. Jackson become involved as the filmâ??s narrator?

RP: As we were approaching the final phase of editing, we started thinking about who would carry this heavy responsibility of Baldwinâ??s words. For these words, I needed more than an accomplished actor. We knew this person should be renowned, but also someone with the political maturity, credibility and confidence to be self-effacing and convey Baldwinâ??s forthright language. And finally, we needed a familiar voice and presence that would not distract from what was essential.

I came up with a list of major black actors, and [there were] three who really fit the criteria. But when you do these things you cannot approach everybody at the same time, you need to prioritize. And Samuel L. Jackson was on the top of my personal list. Through my lawyer Nina Shaw, we asked if he could watch the edit and come on board. We got a yes within a few days.

A month later, as Samuel was shooting in Sofia, Bulgaria, we went there in a studio to record the voice. I am very grateful to him that he embraced the film and its approach.

AFI: Can you talk about the process of editing the film, selecting the final images that made it into the film and the emotional toil of working with these images that span almost half a

century?

RP: The process was an unusual one for making a documentary. It started with the text. I went through all my James Baldwin books. Most were already heavily underlined from many rereads over the years and with the help of â??Remember This Houseâ?• as the main storyline, I assembled a coherent, dramatically impactful first â??manuscript.â?• And somehow the film was there.

In the meantime, my team had already started working on the archival research and acquisition process and we basically went through everything that existed about, with and around James Baldwin in film, radio and television. I was already familiar with a lot of it and some of it was part of my own emotional iconography. When we identified enough archival material (photos, films and all sort of footage), I put everything on the floor in a very large room and started to formally build a first possible editing structure from start to finish.

The rest is a perpetual back-and-forth between images and text, one affecting the other, with the additional difficulty of rights availability, quality of material and budget requirements.

Except for the footage from Ferguson, where we had someone shooting images for us, all the shooting came last. By then, we knew exactly what we needed.

At the end of the day, a film is also the result of a whole life, not just the actual making of it. This film has been bubbling inside me for the last 35 years, probably since the very first time I read Baldwin.

AFI: Does your experience as a Haitian filmmaker inform this film about being black in America?

RP: I come from a country where we knew from day one who we were and where we came from â?? most importantly from a country which made history by freeing itself, on the battlefield, from its masters, and got its independence in 1804.

Contrary to the legend, the first totally free Republic of the Americas is not the United States, but Haiti. The slaves had liberated themselves. And we paid a heavy price for it. So, I know where I come from.

Then again, like most children around the world, I also grew up with the mythology of American cinema and its images. At that time it was called cultural imperialism. Today it is called soft power. Like many children in the third world, I learned very early on how to decipher and deconstruct these images.

As Baldwin put it, â??I discovered that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, that the Indians were me.â?•

This is probably the ideological part of my answer. The other part is just the lessons you learn daily.

As James Baldwin wrote quite eloquently in his very direct and figurative language: â??When a nigger quotes the Gospel, he is not quoting. He is telling you what happened to him today.â?•

Haitian or not, being black is the first identifier people acknowledge. It is part of your daily life. It is life itself, an ongoing experience that never stops, and it will be until there are real, fundamental and structural changes in this country and elsewhere.

Free tickets for the Masters in Conversation screening of I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO will be available on AFI.com beginning November 1.

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Category

1. #AFI
2. #AFIFEST
3. Documentary
4. Hollywood

Tags

1. American cinema
2. â??Remember This Houseâ?•
3. black in America
4. Cameron Bailey
5. Director
6. Documentary
7. essay
8. Film
9. Film Festival
10. Filmmaking
11. Haitian filmmaker
12. I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO
13. James Baldwin
14. Malcolm X
15. Martin Luther King, Jr.
16. Medgar Evers
17. Raoul Peck
18. Samuel L. Jackson
19. soft power

20. Toronto International Film Festival
21. Toronto International Film Festival Artistic Director
22. World Cinema Masters in Conversation

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