



The Emperor Jones
1933

Black and white
Running time: 76 minutes

Directed by Dudley Murphy
Screenplay by Du-Bose Heyward
"Based upon the famous play by Eugene O'Neill"

Cast

Brutus Jones	Paul Robeson
Smithers	Dudley Digges
Jeff	Frank Wilson
Undine	Fredi Washington
Dolly	Ruby Elzy
Lem	George Stamper
Carrington	Brandon Evans
Stick-man	Taylor Gordon
Extra in Nightclub Scene	Billie Holiday
Court Crier	Rex Ingram
Marcella	Moms Mabley
Young Tap Dancer	Harold Nichols
Treasurer	Blueboy O'Connor

The identity of a number of the actors is unknown, e.g. Belle LeDuc and the king.

Eugene O'Neill's Play

The film *Emperor Jones* is, as advertised, based upon a play by the same title written by Eugene O'Neill and first performed on stage in 1920. In considering the film, it is important to know what O'Neill hoped to accomplish with the play and think about the ways in which the film has or has not similar objectives.

1. O'Neill's play is an experiment with Expressionism, an art form that explores and represents individual's complex states of mind. The play is not intended to be a realistic representation but rather fantastical, an audience spending the evening inside an individual's subconscious.
2. The play, therefore, begins where the film ends -- in the jungle as Brutus Jones realizes that his dictatorship has fallen apart and as his mind struggles to deal with this and to assess who he is. Everything we learn about Brutus Jones we learn via his hallucination of it thus nothing is absolutely realistic. [On the other hand, the first 40 minutes of the film tell us the story of Brutus Jones in realistic fashion.] The last 27 minutes of the film is what was the play--the Emperor's flight in the jungle makes up the emotional and psychological core of O'Neill's play.
3. O'Neill means this play in the vein of a Greek tragedy with Brutus Jones as an Everyman and this as the story of his rise and fall from power because of pride (hubris) and a series of miscalculations (hamartia). In O'Neill's play, Brutus Jones is a type of tragic hero whom we meet at the critical turning point in his life, at the moment when his fall begins, and it is the fall which makes up the action of the play. [The film version is quite a different story with his fall from fortune not so much a psychological dilemma as the logical conclusion to all that we have seen of him prior to his flight into the jungle. The film thus puts greater emphasis on his rise to power than on his fall and thus makes it less an Everyman story, him less a tragic hero.]
4. O'Neill meant his play as a commentary on capitalism and what individuals in a capitalist society would do for wealth and power. As O'Neill presents it, the problem with capitalism is not only structural--who is rich and who is poor -- but spiritual and emotional. He thus shifts the critique of capitalism to psychological grounds and, thinking of Brutus Jones as Everyman, questions the implications for the soul and consciousness of a civilization, not just an individual.
5. O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" is also reminiscent of Othello's militancy and pride, bound to fall and of Macbeth's encounter with the ghost of Banquo.

The Film

1. *The Emperor Jones* begins with drumming and under the opening credits we see the drums and then the visual turns into a dance with drumming. A slow lap dissolve follows which momentarily superimposes this tribal dance and a circle dance in the church meeting. What connection does this overlapping of the two make? How does this affect how we see Brutus Jones and how does this work against our imagining him as Everyman?
2. When we first see Brutus Jones he is admiring himself in a mirror. The director, Dudley Murphy, strategically intersperses a series of mirrors throughout the film. Look for these and think about the meaning of each of these mirrors.
3. Why are Dolly and the church congregation so proud of Brutus Jones; what do they expect of him?
4. What are the adjectives you would use to describe Brutus Jones throughout the film; how do they change? Consciously think this through; write down the adjectives you would use to describe him the first time he is on screen; what adjectives would you use to describe him when he is with the church congregation; as the film progresses, note the differing adjectives you would use to describe the character.
5. Why does Undine laugh at him when Brutus Jones tells her how he acquired his money?
6. Think about the visual image of Brutus Jones/Paul Robeson; how might responses to the visual image be different from responses to the plotline?
7. Given the differences in the structure of the play and the structure of the film, is the emperor in the film tragic or merely ridiculous?