



**EARL CAMERON**

# Celebrating Britain's First Black Screen Star

*Actor-director Burt Caesar presents an illustrated overview of the unique seven-decade career in film and television of this modest pioneer. Panel discussions featuring guests such as Esther Anderson, Carmen Monroe, Corrina Antrobus and Baroness Lola Young will consider Earl Cameron's skill, achievement and legacy.*

In 2001, Thomas Baptiste attended an audition for a role in an episode of BBC1's *EastEnders*. However, when he arrived at Elstree, he immediately recognised another veteran screen actor, Earl Cameron, who was also up for the part. Embracing his old friend, Thomas said: 'If I'd known you were going to be here today, I would have stayed at home!' This was Thomas's personal tribute to an actor he respected. Cameron had been a professional actor since 1941, and in 2001 he was still in demand. Cameron got the part.

For several decades, generations of black actors have been paying tribute to Cameron. Nadia Cattouse, who co-starred with Cameron in several TV dramas of the 1950s and 1960s, described him as someone that black actors in Britain had the highest regard for: 'We all liked and admired him. He worked all the time, and gave each role tremendous dignity and humanity.' When Cameron passed away at the age of 102 on 3 July 2020, Paterson Joseph tweeted: 'His generation's pioneering shoulders are what my generation of actors stand on. No shoulders were broader than this gentleman with the voice of god and the heart of a kindly prince.'

Born in Bermuda, Cameron began his acting career on the London stage in 1941 but he did not make his 'official' film debut until Ealing's *Pool of London* in 1951. It's a little-known fact that he began appearing in films – as an extra – as far back as 1944 in *Candlelight in Algeria*. He was also in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945) and *Captain Horatio Hornblower R. N.* (1951). But it was his sensitive performance as the Jamaican merchant seaman Johnny in *Pool of London* that launched him into a career as Britain's first home-grown, non-American black movie celebrity.

Earl described Johnny as a 'fabulous part...the amount of fan mail I received was amazing.' Although Johnny's inter-racial relationship with a young white woman was tentatively handled, *Pool of London* was a sign post of things to come.

In the 1950s, British cinema continued its glorification of the British Empire and colonialism. However, with the arrival of the postwar 'Windrush generation', Britain's culturally diverse inner cities gradually became a realistic setting. As such, Cameron gave memorable performances in *The Heart Within* (1957), *Sapphire* (1959) and *Flame in the Streets* (1961). He also appeared in *A Man from the Sun* (1956), a landmark BBC television drama-documentary about Caribbean settlers in postwar Britain.

When Cameron was working on *Flame in the Streets*, he became an unofficial 'consultant' to the film's director, Roy Ward Baker. Cameron expressed his concern to Baker that the interiors of the homes of the black characters

looked dirty and shabby. He diplomatically informed Baker that working-class black families on low incomes kept their homes nice. Baker immediately made changes to the sets and asked Earl to consult with him on other aspects of the lives of black people for the film.

Throughout the 1960s, television viewers became familiar with Earl in a range of popular dramas including *Armchair Theatre*, *Danger Man*, *Emergency – Ward 10*, *Doctor Who (The Tenth Planet)*, *Theatre 625* and the cult favourite *The Prisoner*. He gave an outstanding portrayal of a jazz musician falsely accused of murder in Leon Griffiths's explosive psychological two-hander *Drama '64: A Fear of Strangers* (1964) with Stanley Baker. That same year he gave one of his best film performances, as the army captain in *Guns at Batasi*, a gripping drama about a revolution in post-colonial Africa. Cameron was also proud of his work in three BBC television plays by black dramatists: John Hearne's *A World Inside* (1962), Errol John's *The Dawn* (1963) and Obi Egbuna's *Wind Versus Polygamy* (1968).

Cameron quit acting in 1979 and made a new home for his family in the Solomon Islands. On returning to Britain in 1994, he resumed his acting career and remained in work until 2013 when he played the grandfather in Nour Wazzi's award-winning short *Up on the Roof*. Along the way he made some memorable film appearances in such films as *The Queen* (2006), as the portrait artist, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010).

When I interviewed Cameron in 1997 for my book *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television*, he told me that, in the 1950s, he had ambitions: 'I wanted to play big parts in films but black film actors in this country were not given any promotion. Our names did not appear on film posters. I lost count of the times we met with Equity to try and stop black Americans being brought over to take roles in British films like *The L-Shaped Room*, *Heaven's Above* and *The Hill*. Roles that I, and many others, could have played. This happened because casting directors didn't believe we – black British actors – could act. But, in spite of this, I did work consistently throughout the 1950s and 1960s.'

Regarding his role as James Bond's chauffeur in *Thunderball* (1965), he said it wasn't much of a part: 'I just drive James Bond around a Caribbean island. But whatever comes along, you play it. Who wants to be typecast! Anyway, I had seven glorious weeks in Nassau. I didn't have much to do in that film, but it was a lovely location!'

In 1997 he reflected on his long and eventful career as an actor: 'My experiences of theatre, television, films has been wonderful. I've enjoyed every minute of it.' In 2002 the National Film Theatre (now BFI Southbank) paid tribute to Cameron and he returned in 2017 for another tribute, for his 100th birthday, with an on-stage interview in NFT1 organised by Screen Nation. It was packed and he received a standing ovation.

Not long before he passed away, he said: 'Actors don't retire. They live in hope – hope that the phone will still ring.'

**Stephen Bourne, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 7 July 2020**

**Burt Caesar** is a British actor, broadcaster and director for stage and television, who was born in St Kitts and migrated to England with his family as a child. His career has encompassed acting in Bond films (*Skyfall*, 2012), stage performances including in Shakespearian roles, and many plays for BBC Radio 4. Caesar regularly works as a director and is an artistic

advisor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). He is also a commentator on theatre and literature.

**Esther Anderson** is a Jamaican filmmaker, photographer and actress. Anderson helped to develop the Jamaican music label Island Records from the early 1960s. In parallel with her photography and work with Island Records, Anderson steadily developed a career as an actress and a filmmaker.

**Carmen Munroe OBE** was born in Berbice, British Guiana as Carmen Steele. She is an actress, known for *Doctor Who* (1963), *Desmond's* (1989) and *From a Bird's Eye View* (1970). Munroe is one of the founders of Talawa, UK's black theatre company.

**Corinna Antrobus** is Arts and Culture Communications Officer for Hackney. Channel 4's *Sunday Brunch Film* presenter and freelance film critic, she was Communications Manager for Picturehouse 26 cinemas and independent film distribution company. Founder of Bechdel Test Fest – an ongoing celebration of films that hail positive representation for women in film, programming film events at various locations in London since 2014.

**Margaret Omolola Young, Baroness Young of Hornsey OBE** is a British actress, author, crossbench peer and Chancellor of the University of Nottingham. Young worked as a professional actress from 1976 to 1984, and from 1990 to 1992 was lecturer in media studies at the Polytechnic of West London. Following this she was lecturer, senior lecturer, principal lecturer, professor of cultural studies and in the end emeritus professor at Middlesex University. Young became project director of the Archives and Museum of Black Heritage in 1997, she was Commissioner in the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts in the years 2000 and 2001, and Chair at Nitro Theatre Company in 2004.

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#### EARL CAMERON

##### BRITAIN'S FIRST BLACK SCREEN STAR

##### Celebrating Britain's First Black Screen Star

Sun 1 Aug 14:00

##### African Odysseys present: A Warm December

Sun 1 Aug 17:30 (+ intro by actor Esther Anderson); Wed 18 Aug 20:40

##### Pool of London

Mon 2 Aug 14:00 (+intro); Wed 25 Aug 20:50

##### Two Gentlemen Sharing

Fri 6 Aug 17:10 (+ intro by season curator Burt Caesar);

Mon 23 Aug 20:30

##### Flame in the Streets

Sun 8 Aug 15:00; Sat 28 Aug 17:10

##### Sapphire

Tue 10 Aug 20:20 (+ discussion); Sat 28 Aug 13:00

##### The Fear of Strangers (+ intro) + The Chocolate Tree

Sat 14 July 14:10

**Thunder on Sycamore Street** + discussion with Actor Ashley Walters (schedule permitting) and playwright Stephen S Thompson)

Sat 14 Aug 17:30

#### Promotional partners



Season co-curated by actor-director Burt Caesar and the BFI's Marcus Prince and David Somerset.

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