



EARL CAMERON

Thunder on Sycamore Street

Followed by a discussion with actor Ashley Walters, novelist and screenwriter Stephen S. Thompson, arts producer and TV historian John Wyver, and casting director Carolyn McLeod. Chaired by season curator Burt Caesar.

Our guest panel will discuss the huge significance of Thunder on Sycamore Street, aided by clips from the TV career of Earl Cameron. We'll investigate what Cameron's career tells us about attitudes at the time and how he navigated them, and ask what lessons the contemporary TV industry can take forward.

As well as celebrating one of the truly trailblazing stars of British cinema, the Earl Cameron season, currently playing at BFI Southbank, brings a rare opportunity to catch a powerful rediscovery from the television archives: *Thunder on Sycamore Street*.

The 1957 play, produced by Granada for the anthology strand *Television Playhouse*, was based on an original script by American Reginald Rose – who was more famously the author of *12 Angry Men*, a play first made for US TV in 1954, three years before Sidney Lumet made his classic film version starring Henry Fonda.

With its themes of an individual holding firm against prejudice and outside pressure, *Thunder on Sycamore Street* makes a fascinating companion piece to Rose's more famous work. When it was first broadcast on ITV in 1957, it was advertised with a simple but intriguing billing: '*Thunder on Sycamore Street* is an unusual dramatic play. It shows how the forceful powers of pride and prejudice can drive ordinary suburban people into cruel violence – striking at someone who seems to be unforgivably different.'

The play had originally been produced for CBS's prestige anthology series *Studio One* in 1954. Rose pitched a story to the network about a middle-class suburban neighbourhood in which the majority of residents form a mob to force one family from their home. In Rose's original story the mob comprised a group of white neighbours who threaten to forcefully remove a black family from their home. However, the premise was rejected by US network executives, fearful for their relationship with programme sponsors and anxious that a play confronting racism and integration wouldn't play to TV audiences in the American south.

The result was that Rose reworked the premise of the play, with the victim of the discrimination becoming a white ex-convict instead of a black man – even if that fact isn't revealed until late in the drama. The suspenseful structure of Rose's play allows the audience to guess why the residents of Sycamore Street want their neighbour to leave, and to project whatever assumptions they might have about the prejudices of the day on to the drama. The family in question – the Blakes – are not seen until the third act of the play.

This reworked version of Rose's play, with the racial discrimination element safely removed, played on US television in 1954, and was then adapted for international broadcasters from countries including Czechoslovakia, Norway, Brazil, Sweden, Hungary, Australia and the Netherlands. (In Britain, the BBC would also produce a version of this reworked play in 1963). To the best of my

knowledge, all of these adaptations retained the alteration that Rose had made for US TV, and had the character of Joseph Blake be a white ex-convict trying to make a life for himself and his family on Sycamore Street, and not a black man facing racial prejudice.

All of which makes Granada's 1957 British production of *Sycamore Street* a still more significant production for its times, and an even more important rediscovery from the ITV Archive. For in Granada's version the Blakes are a black family, with Earl Cameron starring as the father, Joseph Blake. Additional dialogue on the play is credited to the Canadian writer Stanley Mann, and it seems probable that Mann was given permission by Rose to alter his teleplay and revive the writer's original premise. While the paranoia and intolerance displayed in Rose's original teleplay chimes with much American drama that was produced in the era of McCarthyism, the Granada version addresses civil rights and racism head-on – a rarity on British television in 1957 and an outright impossibility on US network TV in 1954.

Cameron's performance as Joseph Blake captures the actor at his most powerful and charismatically magnetic. He vividly portrays Blake's great anger at the unjust situation he and his family face, in a performance that must have been greatly impactful on contemporary audiences – indeed, it remains so today.

He's ably supported by the Jamaican actress and writer Sylvia Wynter (credited here as Sylvia Winters), playing his wife Anna. Wynter is a remarkable figure herself. Shortly after *Thunder on Sycamore Street*, she worked again with Mann and Cameron on various BBC radio plays, before co-writing *The Big Pride* (1961), one of the earliest plays by black writers to be produced on British television. Wynter became a justly celebrated writer and academic, so it's fascinating to see her in a rare early acting role.

Unseen since its original broadcast in October 1957, the play is vital viewing for anyone interested in the history of British and American television. Granada's production of *Thunder on Sycamore Street* is also a striking tribute to the talents of Earl Cameron and a pioneering piece of 1950s television drama – an American play that could only be made in Britain.

Lisa Kerrigan, bfi.org.uk, 10 August 2021

About the panel

Ashley Walters has been acting professionally since childhood, winning his first television role in *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* at the age of 10. His acting career has been varied and prolific across film and television. He is perhaps best known in film for his roles in *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, and *Bullet Boy*, for which he won a BIFA Best Newcomer Award in 2004, and in television for his starring roles in *Top Boy* and *Bulletproof*.

'Asher D' is also a well-known name in the music industry, where he played a pivotal role in the UK Garage scene in the early 2000s, both within the collective So Solid Crew and through his work as a solo artist. His focus has been on acting in recent years, but last year he signed a worldwide publishing deal with Warner Chappell Music, the music publishing arm of Warner Music. Ashley has recently completed the second instalment of *Top Boy* for Netflix and Channel 4's anthology series *I Am...* starring alongside Suranne Jones. As well as being the lead cast on *Top Boy*, Ashley is the executive producer of the show – a role he will be inhabiting far more in the near future. In 2017 Ashley established his own production company, SLNda, through which he is now producing film and

television content that will champion new talent within the UK industry, and better represent the Britain that he sees. In 2021 he made his directorial debut on the short film *Boys* which premiered on Sky Arts.

Stephen S. Thompson is a highly acclaimed novelist and screenwriter of Jamaican descent. His feature-length single drama *Sitting in Limbo* was broadcast on BBC1 in June 2020, and won the BAFTA for Best Single Drama. Produced by Left Bank Pictures and directed by Stella Corradi, the *Independent* called it ‘...a gripping, upsetting and tenderly told dramatic memoir of one man’s ordeal during the Windrush scandal. Its timing could not have been better.’ Next up, Stephen will be adapting his novel *No More Heroes* also for Left Bank/BBC, developing original crime drama *Buried* for Me+You/Endeavour Content and an original drama for Keshet. Stephen’s first novel *Toy Soldiers* was published in 2000 and described by Hanif Kureishi as ‘beautifully written, painfully honest and deeply affecting’. Stephen has also written for *The Observer*, *The Voice*, *Wasafiri*, *Five Dials* and *Arena Magazine*. He is the editor and publisher of the online literary journal *The Colverstone Review*, and co-founder of the creative writing retreat, The Page. He has lectured in Creative Writing at Birkbeck College and the University of Edinburgh, and taught screenwriting at Central Film School in London.

John Wyver is a writer and producer with Illuminations, specialising in arts documentaries and screen performance. He is Director, Screen Productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company, and he produces their RSC Live from Stratford-upon-Avon broadcasts. He is Professor of the Arts on Screen at the University of Westminster, and his publications include *Vision On: Film, Television and the Arts in Britain* (2007), *Screening the Royal Shakespeare Company: A Critical History* (2019) and the forthcoming co-edited collection *Screen Plays: Theatre Plays on British Television*.

Casting for over 15 years, **Carolyn McLeod** is a freelance Casting Director, who specialises in film, theatre, TV and streaming content. She has worked with directors including Paul Schrader, Stephen Herek, Michael Caton-Jones and Sofia Coppola on independent features and numerous projects for Netflix, BBC, Disney, Warner Bros, Hallmark and the Sci-Fi Channel. Recent productions include, *Sweetheart* for BFI/BBC Films, *Boiling Point*, with Stephen Graham and *The Princess Switch* trilogy for Netflix. She is a BAFTA member and is on the board of the European Chapter of the Casting Society of America.

Chair: Burt Caesar is a director and an actor in film and in theatre. His acting credits in film include *The Amnesty Files*, *Scoop*, and *Exorcist: The Beginning*, directed by Paul Schrader. He has directed several film shorts and directed extensively in television drama. Recent TV appearances include in *Unforgotten* and *Death in Paradise*. He has performed in the West End and on Broadway (*Serious Money*), and at the Royal Court Theatre, National Theatre, Edinburgh Lyceum and Theatre Royal Stratford East amongst others, including in some plays of Shakespeare. He is a former Associate Director at the Royal Court Theatre.

As an educator he has taught/directed at BFI, Rada, Central St Martin’s/UAL, Met Film School, Farnham Film School and elsewhere, plus, in the USA, with Tim Reid’s Legacy Media Institute.

TELEVISION PLAYHOUSE:**THUNDER ON SYCAMORE STREET**

Director: Silvio Narizzano

Production Company: Granada Television Productions

Additional Dialogue: Stanley Mann

Based on a script by: Reginald Rose

Cast

Peter Dyneley (*Arthur Hayes*)

Gareth Jones (*Frank Morrison*)

Earl Cameron (*Joseph Blake*)

Robin Brown (*Roger Morrison*)

Ardith Pelton (*Chris Morrison*)

Helen Horton (*Clarice Morrison*)

Redmond Phillips (*Charlie Denton*)

Charles Rolfe (*Mr Harkness*)

Patricia Laffan (*Phyllis Hayes*)

Dudley Hunte (*Johnny Blake*)

Sylvia Winters [i.e. Sylvia Wynter] (*Anna Blake*)

Constance Smith (*Mrs Blake*)

Janet Brandes (*Mrs Carson*)

ITV tx 11.10.1957

UK 1957

52 mins

Featured clips**A MAN FROM THE SUN**

BBC 1956

PLAY OF THE WEEK: THE DEATH OF BESSIE SMITH

Granada TV tx 28.6.1965

DANGERMAN: DEADLINE

ITV tx 4.6.1961

DOCTOR WHO: THE 10TH PLANET

BBC tx 8.10.1966

CROWN COURT: TO SUFFER A WITCH PART 1

Granada TV tx 17.10.1973

WAKING THE DEAD: FINAL CUT

BBC tx 6.10.2003

EARL CAMERON**BRITAIN'S FIRST BLACK SCREEN STAR****African Odysseys present: A Warm December**

Wed 18 Aug 20:40

Two Gentlemen Sharing

Mon 23 Aug 20:30

Pool of London

Wed 25 Aug 20:50

Flame in the Streets

Sat 28 Aug 17:10

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

Promotional partners

Please note: many of these films contain language, images or other content that reflect views prevalent in its time, but that may cause offence today. The titles are included here for historical, cultural or aesthetic reasons and these views are in no way endorsed by the BFI or its partners.

REGULAR PROGRAMME**S.O.U.L. Fest 2021**

Fri 20-Sun 22 Aug

Experimenta: Thundercrack!

+ intro by Jane Giles, author of 'Scala Cinema 1987-1993'

Sat 21 Aug 17:00

Relaxed Screening: Stand Clear of the Closing Doors

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview:

Souad + pre-recorded Q&A with director Ayten Amin

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

Terror Vision: Dr Terror's House of Horrors

Thu 26 Aug 20:40

Woman with a Movie Camera: UK Premiere: Copilot

(Die Frau des Piloten) + Q&A with director Anne Zohra Berrached

Mon 6 Sep 20:25

African Odysseys: No Place Like Home (Redux)

+ Q&A with Justine Henzell

Sat 11 Sep 14:00

Seniors' Free Matinee: The Fallen Idol + intro and Q&A

Mon 13 Sep 14:00

Gallivant + intro by Eden and Andrew Kötting

Sat 18 Sep 14:30

Short Films by Eden and Andrew Kötting

+ Andrew Kötting in Conversation with film curator Gareth Evans

Sat 18 Sep 18:00

Projecting the Archive: Flesh and Blood

+ intro by Jason Morell, actor and son of Joan Greenwood

Tue 21 Sep 18:10

Art in the Making:

Cinema Architecture and Atmosphere + discussion

Thu 23 Sep 18:10

Silent Cinema: Nasty Women: A Comic Tribute

+ intro by curator Bryony Dixon

Sun 26 Sep 12:40

Relaxed Screening: Seeing The Unseen (Að sjá hið ósýnilega)

Tue 28 Sep 18:00

Terror Vision: Altered States

Thu 30 Sep 21:00

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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