



BFI FLARE

Looking for Langston

The influence of Isaac Julien's groundbreaking, lyrical and poetic meditation on the life of revered Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes still ripples throughout the representation of queerness on screen today. Following the film, host of the award-winning *Busy Being Black* podcast Josh Rivers will be joined by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair and Black Queer Media Writer Rico Norwood to discuss the work (alongside Marlon T Riggs' *Tongues Untied*) and explore the past, present, and future of queer cinema, reaffirming modern queer cinema's afro-centric roots.

bfi.org.uk

In Isaac Julien's film, Langston Hughes is not the subject of a biographical documentary so much as an evanescent presence invoked by a dream-like montage of poetry, music and cultural history. Hughes is widely remembered as the key poet of the Black American artistic movement in the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance, but here his public persona is secondary to the enigma of his private life – his sexuality. In an age when homosexuality was regarded as a 'sin against the race', the idea of 'coming out' was unthinkable. *Looking for Langston* imaginatively reconstructs a world previously hidden from history and reflects on 'the beauty of the people with freakish ways'.

Its languid monochrome texture and stylised art direction evoke an ambiguous sense of time and place. Characters inhabit the fictional milieu of a 20s speakeasy, in which tuxedoed couples dance and drink champagne, celebrating hedonistic pleasure in defiance of the hostile world outside, which intrudes at the end as thugs and police raid the club and 80s house music plays on the soundtrack, almost like a music video. Archival film and sound recordings combine with contemporary poetry and music by Essex Hemphill and Blackberri, both Black gay American artists. In its mosaic of visual and literary quotation – from James Baldwin and Toni Morrison to Jean Cocteau and Kenneth Anger – the film unravels complex themes of sexual repression and racial transgression. For example, an exchange of looks between Langston (Ben Ellison) and his mythic object of desire, 'Beauty' (Matthew Baidoo), provokes a hostile, competitive glare from Beauty's white male partner (John Wilson), who in turn contemptuously rejects the inquiring look of a young Black man. Allusions to pornography and Robert Mapplethorpe's Black nudes similarly underline the question of who has the 'right to look', without oversimplifying the erotic fascination with 'difference' that gives a volatile edge to interracial sexuality.

Like other young Black British independent filmmakers, Julien is motivated by a concern with the past in order to throw new light on contemporary issues. The contributions of Black artists to modernism have been consistently written out of official versions of history – or, as Stuart Hall conveys in the film's commentary, after the 20s the 'primitive' Negro was no longer in vogue and wealthy white patrons found other uses for their money. In this sense, *Looking for Langston* is an archaeological project, reconstructing the historical continuum in which Black aesthetic expression has been an integral part of modernism. And it points out that the contributions of Black women and gay

men have been rendered even more invisible by conservative notions about a homogeneous and undifferentiated Black ‘community’.

This critical interest in history suggests that Julien is attempting a dialogue (or its visual equivalent) with the different traditions from which he has invented his own artistic identity as a Black gay ‘auteur’. Black people have historically been the objects of representation, rather than its subjects and creators, as racism often determines who gets access to the means of representation in the first place. Julien overturns this double-bind as the Black subject ‘looks back’. Certain motifs, such as the ‘direct look’ whereby Black characters seem to ask the audience what they are looking for, appeared in the first film by Julien and the Sankofa workshop, *Territories* (1984). With a new degree of self-confidence (and a considerably larger budget), *Looking for Langston* continues and develops this artistic project, deepening the critique of racial representation by extending it into the domain of fantasy. At times, the seductive quality of the film’s preoccupation with its own stylishness risks a degree of cliché, but this is a risk worth taking if a wider audience is thereby invited into the dialogue about the ‘politics of difference’.

Kobena Mercer, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1990

About the panel

Josh Rivers

Josh Rivers is the creator and host of the award-winning podcast *Busy Being Black*. He’s the Communications and Fundraising Manager for international LGBTQ human rights charity Kaleidoscope Trust and volunteers as the Head of Communications for UK Black Pride, Europe’s largest pride celebration for LGBTQ people of colour. He was named one of the UK’s most influential communications professionals in *PRWeek*’s 2022 PowerBook.

Rico Norwood

Kenneth (Rico) Norwood is an American film and video game researcher out of the University of Southampton, who currently resides in both London and Berlin. They hail from Houston, Texas but received their undergraduate degree in Mass Communications from Xavier University of New Orleans and their M.A. in Media Studies at Long Island University’s Brooklyn Campus.

Their primary academic concerns are Black Queer Art and historical narratives through films, as well as video game studies with regards to race, gender, sexuality, and their development. They have been featured in *Metro*, *Wired Magazine*, *TechRadar*, *PinkNews*, the International Screen Studies Conference, and more. They are working as a fulltime researcher in video game/metaverse development for the multimedia company Tales of Us.

Rico Johnson-Sinclair

After working with Flatpack Festival in Birmingham in 2017, Rico Johnson-Sinclair went on to build CineQ, a queer film festival that prioritises Queer and Trans Black and Indigenous people and people of colour which is now in its 5th year. Outside of programming and exhibition, Rico consults with organisations around events that focus on inclusion and diversity. Not limited to film, Rico has led campaigns that focus on marginalised communities; he was also Festival Manager of SHOUT Festival, Birmingham’s queer arts and culture festival offering a mix of dance, music, theatre, live art, visual arts and film and has previously worked for organisations such as Coventry City of Culture and Film Hub Midlands. He is currently Race Equality Lead for the BFI,

working to bring a critical perspective into conversations about race in the film industry. He recently produced the BFI backed film *Sweet Mother* (2019), written and directed by Zane Igbe, and is currently working on his first short film as writer/director named *PREY*, which was also funded by BFI.

LOOKING FOR LANGSTON

Director: Isaac Julien
©/Production Company: Sankofa Film and Video
Producer: Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Production Assistant: Robert Crusz
Runners: James Wolstenholme, Malcolm Manning
Jobfit C4 Trainee: Mary Montgomery
NEMDC Trainee: Emily Mokaene
Assistant Directors: Chris Hall, Maureen Blackwood
Continuity: Julia Britton
Casting: Isaac Julien, Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Screenplay: Isaac Julien
Script Consultant: Mark Nash
Director of Photography: Nina Kellgren
Rostrum Photography: Begonia Tamarit
Focus Puller: Amanda Richardson
Grip: Gary Romaine
Gaffer: Nuala Campbell
Electricians: Natasha Franklin, Simon Jones
Stills: Sunil Gupta
Editor: Robert Hargreaves
Assistant Editor: Emma Matthews
Art Director: Derek Brown
Art Department Stylist: Leslie Gilda
Storyboard: John Hewitt
Props Buyer: Neesh Ruben
Construction Manager: David Ferris
Costume Designer: Robert Worley
Make-up: Hilary Steinberg
Titles: Les Latimer Opticals
Incidental Music: Peter Spencer, Trevor Mathison, Wayson Jones
Sound: Martin Jackson, Ronald Bailey
Dubbing Mixer: David Skilton
New York Research/Production: Mark Nash

Cast

Ben Ellison (*Alex*)
Matthew Baidoo (*Beauty*)
Akim Mogaji (*James*)
John Wilson (*Karl*)
Dencil Williams (*Marcus*)
Guy Burgess (*Dean*)
James Dublin (*Carlos*)
Harry Donaldson (*leatherboy*)
Alaena Adams, James Dublin, Michael Bailey, June Givanni,
Guy Burgess, Cherry Smyth (*mourners*)
Tony Knight, Akim Mogaji, Derrick McClintock,
Jimmy Somerville, Dencil Williams (*angels*)
Michael Bailey, Jon Iwenjiora, Paul Bernstock, Tony Knight,
Steven Brown, Orson Nava, Sarah Dunn, Matthew Scott, Simon Fogg,
Cherry Smyth, Pedro Williams (*dancers at wake*)
Wayne James, Irvine Lewis, Trevor Miller (*brothers in jazz*)
John Alexander, Dave Greaves, Tommy Carlton, AJ, Pete Collins,
Ian Johns, Joe Fordham, Seymour Laws, Reginald Parker (*thugs/police*)
Clarke Peters (*voice reading Langston Hughes*)
Erick Ray Evans (*voice reading Bruce Nugent*)
Essex Hemphill, Wayson Jones (*American voices*)
Toni Morrison (*voice reading James Baldwin*)
Stuart Hall (*British voice*)

UK 1989©
45 mins (total run time 105 mins)

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Restoration Preview:
Dr. Who and the Daleks + Q&A
Sun 19 Jun 11:30
Restoration Preview:
Daleks’ Invasion Earth 2150 A.D.
Sun 19 Jun 14:30
Experimenta Presents: Premiere: Wayfinder + Q&A with director
Larry Achiampong
Tue 21 Jun 18:15
Burning an Illusion + intro by actor Cassie McFarlane
Mon 27 Jun 18:00
Preview: The Afterlight + Q&A with director Charlie Shackleton
Wed 29 Jun 18:20

NEW & RE-RELEASES

Vampyr
Continues from Fri 20 May
Get Carter
Continues from Fri 27 May
Benediction
From Fri 3 Jun
Pickpocket
From Fri 3 Jun
All My Friends Hate Me
From Fri 10 Jun
Bergman Island
From Fri 10 Jun
Swan Song
From Fri 10 Jun
Wings of Desire (Der Himmel über Berlin)
From Fri 24 Jun (Q&A with Wim Wenders on
Sat 25 Jun 15:00)

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