



SIDNEY POITIER: HIS OWN PERSON

Sneakers

Sneakers

Director: Phil Alden Robinson
Production Company: Universal Pictures
Producers: Walter F. Parkes, Lawrence Lasker
Associate Producer: Bill Elvin
Production Manager: Lindsley Parsons Jr
Production Co-ordinator: Lisa J. Watters
Location Manager: Robin A. Citrin
2nd Unit Director: Glenn H. Randall Jr
Assistant Directors: William M. Elvin, Alan Edmisten, Nandi Bowe
Casting: Risa Bramon Garcia, Juel Bestrop
Casting Associate: Mary Vernieu
Extras Casting: Central Casting, Steve Spiker
Screenplay: Phil Alden Robinson, Lawrence Lasker, Walter F. Parkes
Director of Photography: John Lindley
Camera Operator: Lawrence Karman
Steadicam Operator: Jim Muro
Video Operator: Harry Lessing
Computer Effects Supervisor: Steve Grumette
Computer Effects: Will Fowler, Bennie R. Brothers
Computer Graphics Artists: Brett Bentley, Doug Wolfgram
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Kenneth Pepiot
Special Effects Foreman: Albert Delgado
Special Effects: Peter Albiez, Larz Anderson
Editor: Tom Rolf
Production Designers: Patrizia von Brandenstein, Dianne Wager
Set Designers: James J. Murakami, Keith B. Burns, James Tocchi
Set Decorator: Samara Schaffer
Production Illustrators: Thomas W. Lay Jr, Mentor Huebner
Costume Designer: Bernie Pollack
Costume Supervisor: Hugo Peña
Women's Wardrobe: Marie A. Kaderbeck
Men's Wardrobe: Gregory B. Peña
Key Make-up Artist: Gary Liddiard
Make-up Artist: Fred Blau
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Titles: Judith Kahn Inc, Moving Impressions
Music: James Horner
Music Performed by: Branford Marsalis, Mike Fisher, Ralph Grierson, James Horner, Joe Peskin, Ian Underwood
Orchestrations: Brad Dechter, Frank Bennett
Supervising Music Editor: Jim Henrikson
Music Recording: Shawn Murphy
Sound Recording: Willie D. Burton
Sound Re-recording: Donald O. Mitchell, Michael Herbick, Frank Montaña
Supervising Sound Editor: Milton C. Burrow
Sound Editors: Neil Burrow, Scott Burrow, Gordon Davidson, Chester L. Slomka
Additional Sound Effects: Stephen Dewey
ADR Recordist: Doc Kane
Supervising ADR Editor: Uncle J. Kamen
ADR Editor: Shelley Rae Hinton
Foley Artists: Jerry Trent, Audrey Trent
Foley Recordists: Sean McCormack, Karin Roulo
Foley Editor: David L. Horton Jr
Security Consultant: John Strauchs
Mathematical Consultant: Professor Leonard Adelman
Sleight of Hand Consultant: Ricky Jay
Cast:
Robert Redford (*Martin Brice*, '*Martin Bishop*')
Dan Aykroyd (*'Mother*)
Ben Kingsley (*Cosmo*)
Mary McDonnell (*Liz*)
River Phoenix (*Carl Arbogast*)

The many tributes published following Sidney Poitier's death on 6 January 2022 tended to focus, naturally enough, on the actor/director's status as a pioneering figure in 20th century American cinema. Highlighting Poitier's significance as the first Black performer to win the best actor Oscar, and Hollywood's first Black 'matinee idol', the obituaries would mostly centre on the intersection of Poitier's career with the civil rights movement in the context of specific films – *In the Heat of the Night*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (both 1967) – that widened the scope of Black representation. 'He came to this earth to move it, to change it,' enthuses Lenny Kravitz in Reginald Hudson's effusive documentary *Sidney* (2022), which premiered in the year of Poitier's death, encapsulating the reverent tone of the tributes.

Conspicuous by its absence in these commentaries was much discussion of Poitier's later film career – probably because it was felt that there wasn't much worth saying about it. The general consensus is that Poitier's last years on screen were disappointing ones, spent in roles unworthy of his eminence. Poitier's 10 Essential Films, as selected by Neil Mitchell for a BFI feature in 2016, stops at 1972's *Buck and the Preacher*, the fine western that Poitier directed (in his debut behind the camera), and also co-starred in with Harry Belafonte, and which recently gained a welcome resurgence in interest after its referencing in Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022).

Poitier himself appeared to share this view. His 2000 memoir, *The Measure of a Man*, omits reference to his last films altogether, instead giving space to a planned 1990s solo stage venture that never transpired. 'As I grew older the events in my calendar began to take on a more retrospective flavour,' Poitier ruefully shares. 'Testimonial dinners and award ceremonies, documentaries and interviews, as film historians and others looked back to recapture some essence of my time in Hollywood. It was as if I had become a living repository, and not much more.'

Yet for a younger generation, myself included, our first exposure to Poitier wasn't in his great, groundbreaking films of the 1950s and 1960s but rather in those less reputable thrillers he made in the 1980s and 1990s. Doubtless due in part to my mum's status as a major Poitier fan since the early days, the likes of *Deadly Pursuit* (aka *Shoot to Kill*) and *Little Nikita* (both 1988) were eagerly plucked off the shelves and hired from our local video store; age 12, I remember excitedly going to see *Sneakers* (1992) on the opening day of its UK release.

There's a nostalgic attachment to these films due to such associations, but looking back at them now, they're also intriguing for the aspects they share, and the ways in which they draw on elements of Poitier's established star persona while also adapting it to accommodate his appearance as a sleekly ageing icon.

The Poitier presented in these films is a distinguished, suited authority figure: equally a man of thought and a man of action. In both *Little Nikita* and *Deadly Pursuit*, he's an FBI agent (his last theatrically released film, 1997's ill-starred *The Jackal*, would promote him to FBI deputy director), and in *Sneakers* he's an ex-CIA man. Very far from a beefed-up, swaggering Schwarzenegger or Stallone, or a wisecracking Willis of the period, the lean, nimble Poitier relies on smarts as well as physical skill to overcome adversaries. While Poitier doesn't often feature in academic discussion of – or even internet 'listicles' dedicated to – Black action heroes, these films demonstrate that he merits a place in the pantheon.

When Poitier took the lead in Roger Spottiswoode's *Deadly Pursuit*, his focus on directing meant that he'd been absent from the screen for over a decade –

Sidney Poitier (*Donald Crease*)
 David Strathairn (*Erwin Emory, 'Whistler'*)
 James Earl Jones (*Mr Bernard Abbott*)
 Timothy Busfield (*Dick Gordon*)
 George Hearn (*Gregor*)
 Stephen Tobolowsky (*Dr Werner Brandes*)
 Gary Hershberger (*young Bishop*)
 Jojo Marr (*young Cosmo*)
 Bodhi Elfman (*Centurion S&L night guard*)
 Denise Dowse (*bank teller*)
 Hanyee (*bank secretary*)
 Eddie Jones (*Buddy Wallace*)
 Time Winters (*homeless man*)
 Jun Asai (*piano prodigy*)
 Donal Logue (*Dr Gunter Janek*)
 Lee Garlington (*De Elena Rhyzkov*)
 John Shepard (*Coolidge Institute guard*)
 Ellaraino (*Mrs Crease*)
 Shayna Hollinquist, Dayna Hollinquist
 (*Melissa Crease*)
 Jacqueline Brand, Julie Gigante,
 Victoria Miskolczy, David Speltz (*Kiev string quartet*)
 Leslie Hardy (*Gregor's date*)
 John Moio (*Gregor's chauffeur*)
 James Craven, R.C. Everbeck (*FBI agents*)
 Ernie Tetrault (*TV anchorman*)
 Lori Hall (*NSA phone operator*)
 George Kee Cheung (*Chinese restaurant singer*)
 Hayward Soo Hoo (*Chinese restaurant waiter*)
 Michael Kinney, Rudy Francis Nemetz, Al Foster
 (*Playtronics desk guards*)
 Ralph Monaco, Paul Jenkins
 (*Playtronics lobby guards*)
 George Hartman (*Playtronics stairwell guard*)
 Jeffrey Daniel Phillips, Michael Boston
 (*Playtronics perimeter guards*)
 Anthony Winters, Jeff Joy, Amy Benedict
 (*NSA agents*)
 USA 1992
 125 mins
 Digital

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that is, since 1977's crime caper *A Piece of the Action*. Spottiswoode's serviceable buddy movie/wilderness thriller casts Poitier as an agent on the trail of a bloodthirsty extortionist in the Pacific Northwest mountains, aided – with initial reluctance – by a guide (Tom Berenger) whose girlfriend (Kirstie Alley) the absconding villain has taken hostage.

Spottiswoode directs the suspense sequences with skill, but much of the tension and drama initially emerge when the camera simply rests on Poitier's face – watch his eyes dart in the opening sequence as his character suddenly realises the kind of adversary he's up against.

The trajectory of the central relationship between Berenger's mountain man and Poitier's city slicker – a shift from hostility to mutual respect as they struggle to survive together – can't help but recall that of a Poitier classic like *The Defiant Ones* (1958); it allows for a dash of fish-out-of-water comedy, too. '[Poitier] is probably not going to win any awards for this performance,' wrote Roger Ebert, 'but it's nice to have him back.'

There's an odd couple element to Richard Benjamin's *Little Nikita* as well, which places Poitier in a Cold War context. Here his FBI man imparts to River Phoenix's San Diego teen the revelation that the boy's parents are in fact Soviet sleeper agents. The primary pleasure in an otherwise rather lacklustre spy thriller is the dynamic between the youthful actor and the veteran star, who play off each other with evident affection.

Poitier and Phoenix would reteam four years later in *Sneakers*, as part of a motley crew of surveillance experts (Robert Redford, Dan Aykroyd and David Strathairn among them) tasked with locating a mysteriously valuable 'black box.' By far the smartest and wittiest of Poitier's late films, Phil Alden Robinson's highly enjoyable caper comedy is sharp in its take on counterculture radicals, and even looks remarkably prescient in its awareness of a world 'run by little bits of data'. 'There's a war out there,' Ben Kingsley's Cosmo insists, 'and it's about who controls the information.'

Poitier's protagonist, Crease, stands out amid the crew of brainy slackers. Immaculately attired, he's a wryly humorous voice of wisdom, as well as the only family man of the group. The revelation of the reason for the character's dismissal from the CIA comes in a late scene that explicitly alludes to Poitier's screen history of confronting racial prejudice; in truth, the allusion feels a bit cheap, but it's nonetheless perfectly played, as Crease's abrupt loss of composure leads to a funny, crowd-pleasing moment.

Indeed, whatever misgivings he might have had about any of these films, Poitier doesn't appear to treat them as hack work. As an actor he's always alert and making contact with the other performers, while the crackling precision of his vocal delivery enables him to get the best even out of pedestrian dialogue.

Poitier's meatiest later roles would come in TV films – whether opposite Michael Caine in *Mandela and de Klerk* (1997), or in the modest dramas *The Simple Life of Noah Dearborn* (1999) and *The Last Brickmaker in America* (2001). Then there are those texts that allude to or directly represent him: Ryan Calais Cameron's biodrama *Retrograde* is heading to the West End in March after a successful run at the Kiln Theatre last year. More creatively, there's John Guare's sharp and soulful play *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990, filmed by Fred Schepisi in 1993) and Percival Everett's wickedly funny and trenchant novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009) – surely ripe for a film adaptation after *American Fiction's* (2023) success.

That US cinema didn't find more interesting, diverse or major things for Poitier to do as he aged is an abiding indictment of the industry that he himself had done much to transform. But even those films that aren't peak Poitier are distinguished by his presence and the wider story to which it speaks.

Alex Ramon, bfi.org.uk, 6 January 2025