



The Liberation of L.B. Jones

Director: William Wyler

Production Company: The Liberation Company

Producer: A. Ronald Lubin

Production Manager: Russell Saunders

2nd Unit Director: Robert Swink

Assistant Director: Anthony Ray

Screenplay: Stirling Silliphant, Jesse Hill Ford

Based on the novel by: Jesse Hill Ford

Director of Photography: Robert Surtees

2nd Unit Photographer: Jordan Cronenweth

Supervising Editor: Robert Swink

Editor: Carl Kress

Production Designer: Kenneth A. Reid

Set Decorator: Frank Tuttle

Music: Elmer Bernstein

Sound: Jack Solomon, Arthur Piantadosi

Cast:

Lee J. Cobb (*Oman Hedgepath*)

Anthony Zerbe (*Willie Joe Worth*)

Roscoe Lee Browne (*Lord Byron Jones*)

Lola Falana (*Emma Jones*)

Lee Majors (*Steve Mundine*)

Barbara Hershey (*Nella Mundine*)

Yaphet Kotto (*Sonny Boy Mosby*)

Arch Johnson (*Stanley Bumpas*)

Chill Wills (*Mr Ike*)

Zara Cully (*Mama Lavern*)

Fayard Nicholas (*Benny*)

Joe Attles (*Henry*)

Lauren Jones (*Erleen*)

Dub Taylor (*mayor*)

Brenda Sykes (*Jelly*)

Larry D. Mann (*grocer*)

Ray Teal (*chief of police*)

Eve McVeagh (*Miss Griggs*)

Sonora McKeller (*Miss Ponsella*)

Robert Van Meter (*blind man*)

Jack Grinnage (*driver*)

John S. Jackson (*suspect*)

USA 1970

102 mins

35mm

The screening on Tue 15 Apr will be introduced by season programmer Karina Longworth

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SIGHT AND SOUND

You Must Remember This Presents... "The Old Man Is Still Alive"

The Liberation of L.B. Jones

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The title of William Wyler's final film, *The Liberation of L.B. Jones*, is as ironic as that of his most famous work, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946): L.B. Jones's only liberation will be in death.

Many critics were taken aback by this extraordinary film when it was released in 1970. 'Surprising', 'ferocious' and even 'sickening' were among the adjectives most frequently employed. *Variety* dismissed it as 'an inter-racial sexploitation film', whereas Andrew Sarris thought it remarkable. Coming so soon after successful liberal films that close on a note of racial harmony, such as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), the film's pessimism must have seemed totally unexpected.

Even more surprising was the fact that this unrelentingly grim film was made by Hollywood veteran William Wyler, the most honoured of all American directors, but one whose critical reputation had fallen dramatically during the heyday of auteurism. His films were dismissed as cold and impersonal, but *L.B. Jones* is hot and impassioned. The late, great Robin Wood uncharitably dismissed Wyler's work as 'archetypally bourgeois', but there's nothing bourgeois about this film's rage against white supremacists.

L.B. Jones (Roscoe Lee Browne) is a wealthy Black undertaker in a small Tennessee town seeking divorce from his young wife, who is having an affair with a white policeman (Anthony Zerbe). When Brown's wife contests the divorce, the white lawyer (Lee J. Cobb) representing him begins to get cold feet because it means the name of her lover will come out in court, jeopardising race relations and the policeman's career. The events that follow uncover a procession of sexual and legal hypocrisies and outrages by which Blacks are oppressed by whites in that community. Everything builds to a violent climax involving two murders and mutilations. In both cases, the guilty perpetrator escapes unpunished.

One would expect a Wyler film to be well acted; he had, after all, guided more actors to Oscar-winning performances than any other director. Roscoe Lee Browne, Lee J. Cobb and Anthony Zerbe are the pick of a fine cast, Zerbe in particular excelling as the wretched cop who has a modicum of conscience writhing uncomfortably beneath his surface bigotry. A scene between Zerbe and Brown across a breakfast table, in which the cop tries to pressure the undertaker into dropping the divorce, is an especially fine example of Wyler's *mise en scène*: Brown's stillness reflects the character's obstinacy, while Zerbe's nervous pacing and his inability to command the cinematic space eloquently suggest the policeman's innate weakness.

The most powerful sequence is the ten-minute chase of Jones across a junkyard by two policemen intent on silencing him before he gets to court. I can think of few more desolate and disturbing images in all cinema than the sequence's final overhead shot of Jones's murdered body hanging by a hook next to that of a dead dog, which is being called forlornly in the distance by its blind owner, as the two policemen silently survey the result of their night's work.

In some ways, the film's most original aspect is its structure. Wyler sets up genre expectations of the liberal Hollywood movie that he then ruthlessly

You Must Remember This Presents... "The Old Man Is Still Alive"

The Tiger of Eschnapur Der Tiger von Eschnapur
Tue 1 Apr 20:45; Sat 12 Apr 12:00 (+ pre-recorded
intro by season programmer Karina Longworth)

A Hole in the Head

Wed 2 Apr 20:40; Sat 5 Apr 15:00

The Indian Tomb Das indische Grabmal

Sat 5 Apr 20:30; Sat 12 Apr 15:00 (+ pre-recorded
intro by season programmer Karina Longworth)

Cheyenne Autumn

Wed 9 Apr 20:10; Sat 19 Apr 14:20 (+ intro by
season programmer Karina Longworth)

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Sat 12 Apr 17:30; Fri 18 Apr 14:00 (+ intro by
season programmer Karina Longworth)

Red Line 7000 + intro

Mon 14 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Sat 26 Apr 20:50

The Liberation of L.B. Jones

Tue 15 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Sun 20 Apr 14:50

The Only Game in Town

Tue 15 Apr 20:35 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Fri 25 Apr 17:55

Frenzy

Wed 16 Apr 20:35 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Sun 27 Apr 18:35

Such Good Friends

Thu 17 Apr 20:45 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Mon 21 Apr 13:45

True Grit

Fri 18 Apr 17:50 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Sat 26 Apr 17:35

Rich and Famous

Sat 19 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by season programmer
Karina Longworth); Wed 30 Apr 20:40

Avanti!

Sun 20 Apr 14:40; Wed 23 Apr 20:15

Movie Movie

Sun 20 Apr 18:30; Mon 28 Apr 20:50

Under the Volcano

Mon 21 Apr 18:35; Tue 29 Apr 20:50

dismantles. Far from revealing a warm humanity under the gruff exterior, Lee J. Cobb's lawyer becomes more deeply compromised and contemptible in his selective morality. Lee Majors's young lawyer, seemingly a character likely to rectify wrongs, walks out of the situation with righteous but impotent anger. L.B. Jones refuses to run and his courage leads directly to his brutal murder. A Black youth (Yaphet Kotto) who renounces violence midway through the film returns at the end to exact a vengeance more sadistic than the one originally planned.

In his last interview before his death, Wyler told his daughter Catherine that he had aimed the film at a white audience who he hoped would be embarrassed and enraged by what he depicted. Perhaps he succeeded too well. In the immortal phrase of Wyler's former employer Sam Goldwyn, the public stayed away in droves. Its picture of a conflicted America might have struck too many raw nerves in a country still reeling over the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, a divisive war in Vietnam – and the departure from the White House of another LBJ.

The film seemed then to fall off the critical map, being displaced by Black American filmmakers with their own visions of the Black experience. To the best of my recollection, it has not been shown on terrestrial television here for over 20 years and has yet to be given a proper DVD release.

As a huge fan of Wyler's work, I saw the film on its UK release playing as second feature to Irvin Kershner's adult comedy *Loving* (another fine, forgotten film that warrants rediscovery). I was with a friend who was so distressed by it that she never stayed for the main feature and never accompanied me to the cinema again. For me its power remains undiminished. In the era of Obama's America, it surely deserves reclamation as the fiercest indictment of racial prejudice ever to come out of a major Hollywood studio. For cineastes too it might give a fresh perspective on Wyler who, right to the end of his career, was trying out new things and vigorously denouncing injustice. But be prepared to be shocked: it makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* look like *Mary Poppins*.

Neil Sinyard, *Sight and Sound*, January 2011

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