



THE RESURRECTION OF NATIVE SON

Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* was a landmark in American literature, the first serious treatment of race by an African-American author to become a runaway commercial success. Because of its historical significance and the intensity of its critique of American racism, it is rarely noted that *Native Son* contains a great many elements of classic noir crime fiction. JAKE HINKSON talks to one of the men most responsible for resurrecting this hugely significant "lost" film, EDGARDO KREBS.



Director Pierre Chenal (third from right) on the tenement set with Gloria Madison and Richard Wright (far right). Atilio Mentasti, executive with Argentina Sono Film, is fourth from left

The story of *Bigger Thomas*, an impoverished 20-year-old black man who finds himself dropped into a nightmare after he accidentally kills a young white woman, is as much a page-turner as a James M. Cain novel. Wright and playwright Paul Green adapted the novel into a stage play produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman in 1941 (with Canada Lee as *Bigger*), but the novel's violent and propulsive plot seemed to beg for the film noir treatment.

Of course, such a treatment was unthinkable in the Hollywood system. Wright would have to wait another ten years before he saw the book adapted into a film by producer Jamie Prades and director Pierre Chenal. The film, shot mostly in Argentina, would star Wright himself as *Bigger*. Banned in many places, chopped up by careless censors, and dismissed by the critics, the film was greeted as an oddball failure.

In recent years, however, thanks to the efforts of film historian Fernando Martín Peña, scholar Edgardo Krebs, and the Library of Congress, the film has been brought back from the dead and returned to its original form. The restored film made its debut at the New York Film Festival on October 8, 2012, and it will be featured in the Film Noir Foundation's 2013 NOIR CITY programs in San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC.

The film itself is an undeniably fascinating piece of work. In adapting the novel, Chenal, Prades and Wright crafted a full-on film noir. From gorgeous sweeping camera shots to a hauntingly surreal-

ist dream sequence, Chenal utilizes a style that would not seem out of place alongside Welles's *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948) or Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945). And to add to the noir atmosphere, there are familiar faces like Jean Wallace and Charles Cane.

In the sharpness of its social critique, the film would make a strong companion piece to Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948). *Bigger Thomas* stalks the streets of a Chicago that is broken by poverty and strewn with trash, a destitute place walled in on all sides by unscalable walls of institutional racism. If *Bigger* is a man who makes his own tragic choices, he is also a man shaped by forces beyond his comprehension. Like Polonsky's film or Endfield's *Try and Get Me* (1950), *Native Son* is the rare kind of film noir that seems to stick all of American society under its microscope. It's one of the few movies that could be categorized as epic noir.

It is worth pointing out that the film is not perfect. Wright is a limited actor and the occasional cheap back projection mars an otherwise handsome production. It is also worth pointing out that the film is a wholly unique exploration of American racism, what Film Noir Foundation President Eddie Muller regards as "an incredibly significant 'missing' piece of cinema history, an actual African-American film noir made during the classic era." It is a potent and often powerfully jarring counterbalance to the vast majority of films of the era which either featured grotesque racial caricatures or simply rendered black Americans invisible by excluding them from the screen altogether.



Narciso Ibanez Menta (center) playing Bigger Thomas in the 1944 production of *Sangre Negra* at El Nacional theater in Buenos Aires, Chenal's first exposure to Wright's story

One of the key figures in the recovery of *Native Son* is the Argentine social anthropologist Edgardo Krebs. I had a chance to talk with Mr. Krebs about the film and its restoration.

Jake Hinkson: Do you know how Pierre Chenal got involved in the project? In a piece you wrote for *Film Comment* ("Native Son, Lost and Found"), you say that he was ready to direct the film when "the opportunity arose"—does that mean that he had been actively looking to make an adaptation of Wright's book?

Edgardo Krebs: During his WWII exile in Buenos Aires, Chenal had seen the Spanish version of the Orson Welles theater adaptation of *Native Son*. As Chenal himself tells the story, four years later, when he was back in Paris, the producer Jaime Prades approached him with the idea of doing a film for an Argentine studio. Chenal and Prades (who was from Uruguay) had worked together in *Se abre el abismo* (Pampa Films, 1944), one of four films Chenal directed in Argentina between 1941 and 1945. The terms of Prades' proposal were quite broad. The US had embargoed the exports of stock film to Argentina during the war, with the pretext that the government in Buenos Aires would favor the production of propaganda films sympathetic to the Axis powers. In fact, there was a commercial reason behind the embargo: the popularity of Argentine films in Latin America. They were competing favorably with Hollywood for that market.

The embargo was devastating. Several studios had to close down, and the production of Argentine films per year was decimated to one third. It was the end of the

Golden Age of the Argentine film industry... and the beginning of the Golden Age of Mexican films, since Americans put a lot of money to develop their studios. Prades told Chenal that Argentina Sono Film was desperate to produce a film, and that he could choose the topic. And Chenal saw this as an opportunity to realize "an old dream" of his: making *Native Son* into a movie. Wright's literary agent, Madame Bradley, was very skeptical about the chances that an American studio would take *Native Son* to the screen. So that was the initial spark. Wright, who by then was also living in Paris, agreed to do it. It was also an old dream of his to make this film.

JH: Do you know how Jean Wallace got involved? This film comes at a troubled time in her life—between her suicide attempt in late 1949 and her divorce from Franchot Tone in late 1950—so I'm interested to know if you can tell us anything about her involvement in the picture.

EK: According to Michel Fabre, author of several books on Richard Wright, the role was offered first to other Hollywood actresses (he gives no names) who "refused to appear on the screen in the arms of a black man." As you mention, Jean Wallace was facing many problems in her private life and her acting career was at an impasse. These circumstances may have decided her to take the risk. Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, who was assistant director to Chenal during the filming of *Native Son*, told me that she was very professional and liked by the crew. And that she got along well with Richard Wright. Wallace was only in her mid-twenties but had gone through a lot

already. The story of how the cast was assembled is one of several stories within the story that turn the making of *Native Son* (or *Sangre Negra*, as it was titled in Spanish) into such a rich archive on the history of the 1950s, across a number of sensitive subjects.

JH: One source of contention in the reception of the film has always been Wright's casting as Bigger. Do you have a sense of why a) Chenal wanted to cast him, and b) why Wright accepted?

EK: Wright wrote an essay on the lack of opportunities for blacks in the movies, on how poorly they were represented as human beings, with complex lives, a worldview, opinions, problems, joys. When Chenal was looking for black actors in Chicago for the cast of *Native Son*, Wright told him that he would not find them. Perhaps in Hollywood? "Aside from singing, dancing and playing music" he added, "blacks have the doors closed to any other artistic activity." Wright had been trying in vain



for over a decade to interest Hollywood studios in producing scripts he had written on topics like the Underground Railroad, or a travelling group of singers during Reconstruction, all of them former slaves. These themes allowed Wright to display his cinematic imagination on meaningful stories that were central to black history. But nothing materialized. So he was very hands-on when the chance of making *Native Son* came up.

The first choice of both Chenal and Wright was to cast Canada Lee in the role of Bigger Thomas, but he refused the offer. Chenal then began to think that Wright himself could act the part. It was during the course of discussions with him about the logistics of the film that Chenal noticed that “something strange” was taking place: while explaining things, “Dick was turning into Bigger Thomas, the hero spoke through the mouth of its creator.” There were other details, having to do with Wright’s personality and body language: the high-pitched voice, the attitude, certain gestures. So Chenal posed the question: would you consider playing Bigger Thomas? Wright laughed and responded “But man, I am no actor!” Chenal insisted. “You do not need to pretend to be one,” he said, “just live Bigger’s nightmare.”

Several critics who never saw the complete film, only the brutally censored one, have come down on Wright because of his age: he was too old to play Bigger Thomas to begin with. They also wondered ruefully what could have happened if Canada Lee had played the part. But Canada Lee was a year older than Wright! If you see Lee in *Cry, the Beloved Country* [1951], which was filmed roughly at the same time as *Native Son*, one has to wonder how would have Chenal managed to make him into a convincing Bigger. I think that critics remembered Lee from the Orson Welles theater adaptation, where he turned out an extraordinary performance. But ten years had passed. Wright accepted the role because Chenal gave him the confidence that he could do it. And Chenal was not making things up. He saw something in Wright that he could work with.

JH: How influenced was the film by the Welles/Houseman production?

EK: Very influenced. If you compare certain pictures of the play with photographs of the movie the resemblances are striking. Chenal and Wright worked directly on the text of the Welles/Houseman production. Even though Paul Green was involved in delivering a first draft, neither Houseman nor Wright himself were happy with the results. Green had taken out, or tinkered with, several passages at the heart of the novel. These were important to Wright, who was very concerned that the authenticity and power of the story would not be lost. So he and Houseman reworked Green’s draft in secret. The same happened with Chenal and Wright. They took the play as a starting point and



Gloria Madison as Bessie Mears. She was a student at the University of Chicago when Chenal and Wright discovered her

worked together to turn it into the script for the film.

JH: Do you know anything about the magnificent shot of Bigger and Bessie climbing the stairs in the abandoned building? Is that a crane shot on a gigantic set? Unless I miscounted, they climb four full floors!

EK: The shot you mention, it was one of the many feats of Gori Munoz, who designed the sets for the film, and got awards for doing so. Chenal and Wright, as I mention in my answers, were adamant about authenticity. Chenal took many pictures in the

South Side of Chicago (I wish that they may exist somewhere, and that they will surface one day) and also recorded the sounds of the L-train—all of this with the aim of reconstructing the atmosphere of Bigger Thomas’s neighborhood as faithfully as possible in Argentina Sono Film’s studios. The scene you mention was done by traveling: the camera raised together with Bigger and Bessie, following the characters as they climbed the stairs. When criticisms of the mutilated version blamed a wobbly production for the quality of the film, an irritated Chenal let it be known that he had everything he needed to do *Native Son*, all the technical means and resources, at a level comparable to what a studio in France or Hollywood could offer at that time. So, the scene you liked was shot in a studio, and Gori Munoz (responding to Chenal’s needs) was responsible for engineering it.

JH: Even in its mutilated form, was there an audience for the film? Do you think the film would have been more financially successful had it been shown uncut?

EK: There was certainly an audience for the uncut version in Argentina. It opened at the biggest theater in Buenos Aires, and tickets sold out for the first two weeks. The critical reviews were also very good. However, Chenal had always thought that the film, although produced in Buenos Aires, was destined to an international market. And certainly that’s how Argentina Sono Film executives and Richard Wright himself understood the project. It was the first film done entirely in English in Argentina. Success in the local market was encouraging and a vindication, but all the great expectations were placed on the American and European markets. Argentina Sono Film planned a fancy premiere on board a Pan Am flight.

But what Chenal and all the others underestimated was how dead serious some American politicians were in their resolve to stop a film that was critical of segregation. To make things worse, Wright had been linked with the Communist party, and these were the McCarthy years. Argentina Sono Film did not anticipate either the cold reception that Europeans would give to *Native Son*. The Marshall Plan was in full application, and that France or Italy or Germany would put at risk the economic aid they needed by making a fuss about this



Gloria Madison and Richard Wright, as Bessie and Bigger

polemical film may have been naïve. Argentina Sono Film had tried to make a deal with Paramount for the international distribution of *Native Son*, but failed. They finally signed a contract with Walter Gould's agency, Classic Pictures. The studio kept the rights for three countries only: Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. I assume that only in those three countries the film was seen uncut.

In the US, Walter Gould had recurrent problems with the Boards of Censors in several states. The outcome was a badly cut version of *Native Son*. Thirty-two minutes were chopped off. The equivalent, as Chenal graphically described it to Wright in a letter, of 800 meters of celluloid. That mutilated version was dragged through several theaters in the US, and also shown in Spain, Italy, Great Britain, Sweden. ... But it was a maimed artifact, a sort of Elephant Man spectacle. Chenal was livid. He even considered withdrawing his name from the credits. Wright understood that the film had been killed, and turned the page.

I think we have to assume that the film would not have been successful in the 1950s, because it could not. Chenal argued, in a letter to Wright, that the European public could not be inferior to the Argentine public. If Peron had not censored the film, why would Europeans do it? It finally sunk in for him that the film would fail in "Democracy No. 1" and he resigned himself to the cuts and the bad

reviews there. But as long as the copy released in Europe was identical to the one shown in Buenos Aires he remained confident about the success of the film. Gould did not follow that path. He even wrote an incredible letter to Wright, arguing that the mutilated copy was better than the original, and that he should pay no attention to Chenal's combative defense of the "Buenos Aires" version.

What interests me is to see how film historians, cultural critics and intelligent viewers will react now to the complete film; how will they judge and reappraise it. And that means also looking at its history, at how it was reviewed in the 1950s in Europe, and in places like Brazil. The subject deserves a documentary that teases out all these strands and explores the context in which the film was shot. I am working on that with Ted Thomas, director of *Walt and El Grupo* (2008).

JH: I read something by Michel Fabre that said Wright had a special love for film noir. Do you have any sense that Wright or Chenal conceived of the film as a film noir—or not so much as a "film noir" per se, because the term wasn't in general use at the time, but as a film in the style that we would come to define as film noir? Were there films they patterned their production after?

EK: Wright was a film addict, a fan, particularly of film noir. Some



Richard Wright (right) with George Green, who played “Panama,” one member of Bigger’s band of petty thieves

scenes of *Native Son* take place in a movie theater, and they were essentially kept in the film version. When Gabriel Garcia Marquez learned, in 1949, that a film adaptation of the novel was being produced in Buenos Aires, he wrote an article for a Colombian newspaper wondering whether Chenal would be faithful to the cinematographic feel of the book. And as I mentioned before, in the forties Wright kept trying to negotiate with Columbia Pictures the purchase of film scenarios he had written. He also contacted John Grierson. He wanted to work for him at the National Film Board.

As for Chenal, he began doing short documentaries. Then he wrote a book on the influence of Surrealism and Dadaism on film. But when he moved into directing fiction one of his first projects was a version of *Crime and Punishment* (1935). Soon after that he made the first film adaptation of James Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1939). Chenal had an affinity for, and was a pioneer of, film noir. He liked the essential formula of a transgression, the commission of a sin and the events triggered by it. He then observed the characters trapped in those circumstances, how they reacted. There are a number of similarities between *Postman* and *Native Son*. In both films the men playing the bad guy end up in jail and accepting their fate with a sort of redemptive calmness. *Native Son*, the novel, is what it is, a classic of American literature.

I subscribe to what the philosopher Richard Rorty said about the value of ethnography and fiction, giving the work of Richard Wright

as one of the examples. “Coming to see other human beings as ‘one of us’ rather than ‘them’ is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like, and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.” Theory does not accomplish this. Good ethnographies and good novels do.

I think that *Native Son*, the film, is an incredible repository of that process. It shows both the merits of the novel, of a good description of a social situation, and also the reaction to the description, the impulse to suppress it so that the ‘unfamiliar’ remains unfamiliar, and outside our moral frame of reference. The film works for me as film, but more interestingly—because of how it was made and how it was subsequently massacred by censorship—as a sort of museum installation of all the issues related to race, prejudice and segregation that Richard Wright boldly addressed in the novel.

JH: Do you know how long production lasted? I’ve read that Wright spent most of ’48-’49 working on the script, and spent from October ’49-June ’50 shooting it. To the best of your knowledge, is that correct? If so, do you know why it would have taken so long?

EK: Yes, that sounds correct to me. It took that long because it was not a straightforward project from the very beginning. Chenal had problems finding a cast. He had problems shooting in Chicago—which he did without permits, illegally. Then, according to Sanchez de Lozada, the source of the money for making the film (I have not



At the nightclub where Bessie sings, Jean Wallace (right) plays the doomed Mary Dalton, whose boyfriend Jan Erlone (Gene Michael) tries to recruit Bigger to the Communist cause. Note Mary's provocative grip on Bigger, her chauffeur

been able to search yet for corroborating documents), came from retentions the Peron government established for the box office tallies of Hollywood films shown in Argentina. This was a sort of retaliation for the film stock embargo during the war. Prades had somehow gotten access to one of those pools of money.

This would explain to me the many complications some authors describe Richard Wright had in drawing contracts and subcontracts for the film. They had to sidestep government controls. Finally, even though Chenal had seen possibilities in Wright as an actor, in the actual process of shooting Chenal was quite demanding and some scenes required several takes. One of the reasons that Sanchez de Lozada [Editor's Note: Sanchez de Lozada would go on to become the 74th and 77th President of Bolivia] was quickly promoted to assistant director (having started the shoot as the person in charge of continuity) was his good English. Chenal needed him in order to communicate fluidly with Wright.

JH: Perhaps you could also confirm or disconfirm something for me: I've read that Wright had problems with producer Jamie Prades and director Chenal during filming (particularly because Chenal wanted to make larger departures from the novel).

EK: I think that the problems with Prades stemmed from the peculiar origin of the funds. Prades has gotten quite a bad rap from Wright's biographers. They may be right; I have no privileged insight about his personality and methods. But it is clear to me that he was a

pro. He went on to strike a very successful partnership with Samuel Bronston, with whom he produced films like *King Of Kings* (1961), *El Cid* (1961), *55 Days In Peking* (1963). ... The relationship between Chenal and Wright was cordial. They understood each other. They both wanted to make the best film possible. And respect the book. Chenal showed the complete film—except for the credits—to Wright, as soon as it was available, and before he left Argentina. Wright was very happy with it, and pleasantly surprised with how he had done as an actor.

JH: Can you tell me how Fernando Martin Peña uncovered the long lost 16mm print?

EK: It is a picaresque story, and Fernando should tell it himself because I do not have all the details lined up as he does. We need to start by saying that when Laboratorios Alex burnt down in 1969, many of the negatives of Argentina Sono Film disappeared—those of *Native Son* included. Fernando learned in the early '90s that an eccentric film collector miraculously had a 16 mm copy, and that he was showing it at a cine club in Buenos Aires. In 1999 the collector was in dire straits and offered to sell the copy to Fernando. He bought it, and quickly realized that he had a complete version of *Native Son*, the same one that opened in Buenos Aires in 1951, and the one that Chenal repeatedly put forward as the only valid version of the film. ■