

# THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO

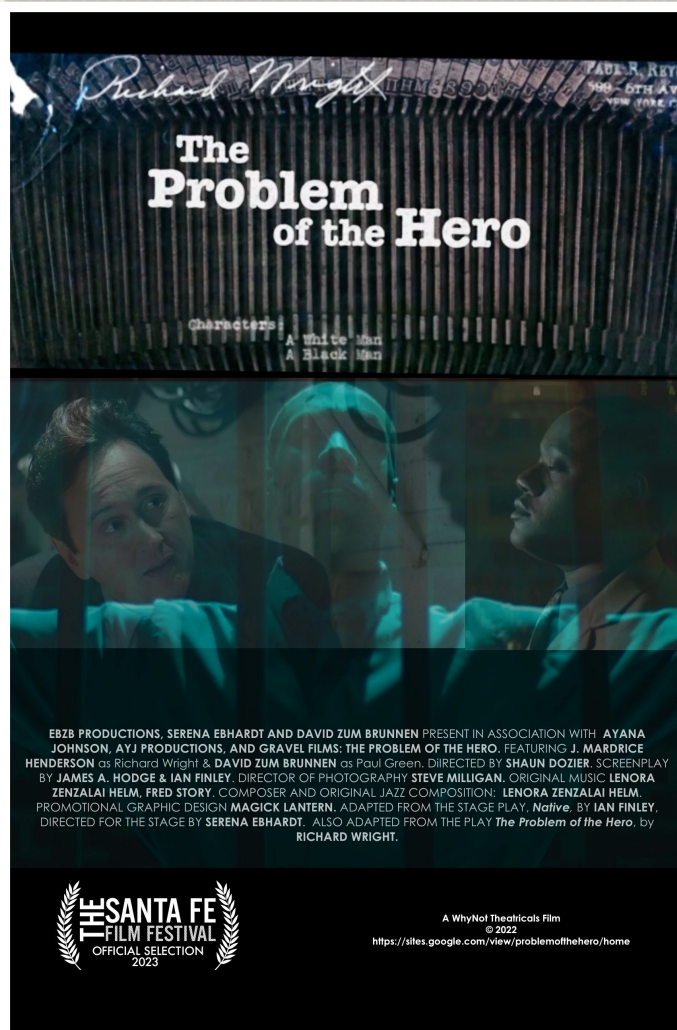
FEATURE FILM

## THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO

### A STORY FOR OUR TIME...

In 1940, controversial author Richard Wright turns to Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paul Green to help adapt his best selling book, *Native Son*, into a Broadway play. A friendship between the two develops - they debate and collaborate for several weeks over the summer in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, laboring night and day through extreme heat to adapt the story of Bigger Thomas, a young black man who accidentally but brutally kills a white woman in her bedroom.

Now it is March, 1941, and they are in New York at the St. James Theatre on the eve of opening night, and a difference of opinion over a single page of the script threatens an impasse. As rehearsal continues around them, led by the mercurial Orson Welles, the ensuing argument - delving into race, class, politics, and personal story - seems destined to dissolve their friendship.



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## THE STORY BEHIND OUR STORY...

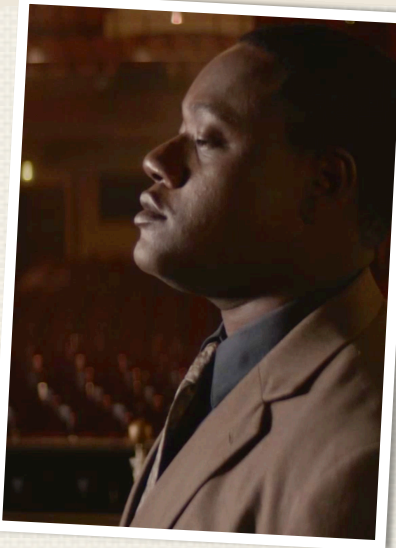
First there was the 1940 novel *Native Son*, Richard Wright's groundbreaking novel - which explored systemic oppression and its impact on African-Americans.

Close on its heels was the 1941 Broadway play *Native Son*, adapted from the novel of the same name, written by Green and Wright, directed by Orson Welles.

In 2015, North Carolina playwright (& former Piedmont Laureate) Ian Finley wrote a one-act play about Green and Wright's final argument over the script during the rehearsals of the 1941 production of the play *Native Son*, adapted from the novel of the same name. This modern play has toured the eastern US, playing to enthusiastic audiences & favorable notices for the last several years (pre-Covid).

From 2019 to 2022 EbzB Productions produces a film based on Ian Finley's 2015 play about the 1941 Broadway play *Native Son*, adapted from the novel of the same name.

Exploring societal issues then and now, in a film based on a play about a play adapted from a novel.



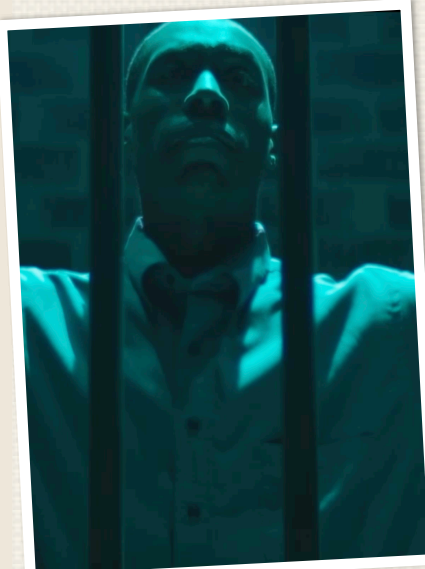
## RICHARD WRIGHT

**Richard Wright** (September 4, 1908 – November 28, 1960) was an American author of controversial novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction. His literature concerns racial themes, especially related to the plight of African Americans who suffered discrimination and violence in the South and the North. Literary critics believe his work helped change [race relations in the United States](#). His novel *Native Son* was published in 1940. After publication, *Native Son* was selected by the [Book of the Month Club](#) as its first book by an African-American author.



## PAUL GREEN

**Paul Eliot Green** (March 17, 1894 – May 4, 1981) was an American [playwright](#) best known for his depictions of life in North Carolina during the first decades of the twentieth century. He received the [Pulitzer Prize for Drama](#) for his 1927 play, *In Abraham's Bosom*. The first of his outdoor symphonic dramas, *The Lost Colony* (1937) is still played during the summer in an outdoor theater at [Fort Raleigh National Historic Site](#) near [Manteo, North Carolina](#). *The Lost Colony* is the oldest outdoor historical drama in the United States.



## COLLABORATION

Playwright and professor Paul Green had a strong interest in black folk culture and improving race relations. The black novelist Richard Wright asked Green to collaborate on adapting his novel *Native Son* (1940) for the stage. In 1941, Green invited Wright to Chapel Hill for that purpose. They worked together at Green's home and in his office in Bynum Hall. Because of segregation laws, Wright could not stay in Chapel Hill hotels, so he boarded with a black family in Carrboro. When the play opened on Broadway, it was a critical and commercial success.

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## Native Son On Broadway

*Native Son* is a 1941 [Broadway](#) drama written by [Paul Green](#) and [Richard Wright](#) based on Wright's novel [Native Son](#). It was produced by [Orson Welles](#) and [John Houseman](#) and directed by Welles. It ran for 114 performances from March 24, 1941 to June 28, 1941 at the [St. James Theatre](#). This is the last time Welles and Houseman, co-founders of the [Mercury Theatre](#), ever worked together.

## VISUAL APPROACH...

The style is practiced and reserved. Nothing handheld, though this is not meant to discount movement. The camera will move fluidly throughout the scene when necessary. We have been rather bold in production as well as the cut, holding for longer than expected in order to capture the measure of the moment.

There are several moments when the story demands a transition between the present and the past - or a reminder that we are in a theatrical space. These were shot seamlessly through a clever camera move (a la John Sayles in *Lonestar*) or a match cut. Much of the film takes place at the majestic Carolina Theatre in Greensboro, NC, standing in for the St. James, the stage itself standing in for the location of memories through these careful transitions.

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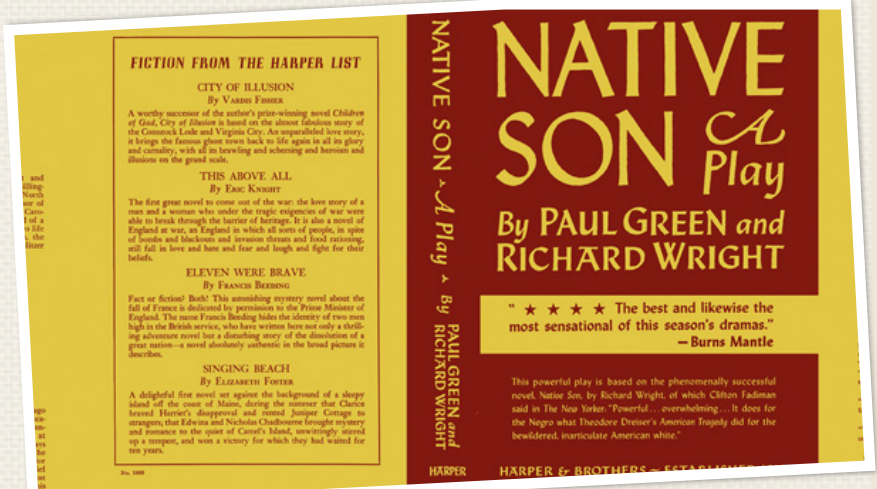
is the story of a renowned, committed, progressive, white, anti-racist (Paul Green) being brought face to face with his own limitations by a young black writer and activist (Richard Wright) who was well on his way to becoming an icon of the twentieth century.

Their failure to come to terms was a moral tragedy, one which should be all too familiar to us in the time in which we live. At question: in the end, who gets to tell stories, and what are their responsibilities in the telling? This is a film that does not shy from exploring the deep issues and questions these two men faced together and issues we face today - in our own country and globally.

It would be comfortable to paint Green, a southern, middle-aged, white man, as a stereotypical closet racist, paired with Wright, a salty but saintly black hero: where they experience real peril, they form a heartwarming friendship, and then the white man triumphs over his bigotry so they can form an alliance against the true forces of racism in America... a garden-variety, feel-good, interracial, odd-couple buddy movie, the sort from which audiences can exit the theater feeling heartened by their own empathy. THIS is not THAT kind of film. Green and Wright's first major argument was also their last. Green left New York the next day. He and Wright never spoke again.

"Bigger Thomas" in *Native Son* on Broadway, 1941.

The Broadway performance used Richard Wright's preferred ending.



The published Version of *Native Son* contains Paul Green's version of the ending.

