

WhyNot Theatricals Presents

THE PROBLEM OF THE HERO



85 mins - 2023 - Color - English - Aspect Ratio = 2:39:1

GENRE: **Drama | Narrative Feature**

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SYNOPSIS:

In March of 1941, at the St. James Theatre in New York, Two 20th century literary giants, ground breaking author Richard Wright and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Green collaborate to adapt Wright's best-selling book, *Native Son*, into a Broadway play. Days from opening night, they differ over a single page of the script. The difference of opinion evolves into a spirited contention over issues of race, social justice, politics, and personal & creative agency. The argument threatens to dissolve their friendship.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

Who has the right to tell a story and what are their obligations in the telling? We asked ourselves this question throughout the making *The Problem of the Hero*.

In June and July of 1940, ground breaking novelist Richard Wright joined Pulitzer Prizewinning playwright & social justice advocate Paul Green at his office in Chapel Hill, NC, to dramatize *Native Son* for the Broadway stage. They ended their initial work together as friends, and shared (according to both of their recollections) a profound admiration for the other person.

Wright traveled back to New York where, under the influence of John Houseman and Orson Welles, he restored his own preferred ending to the play (where Green had made changes) before the play's opening in March of 1941. The film is our interpretation of the conflict that ensued.

Wright wrote about their many Chapel Hill conversations in the form of a debate between a White Man and Black Man which he called "The Problem of the Hero". Though never published, Green did give his approval to the potential publisher (The New York Times). The portrait of the White Man, however respectful, is not entirely flattering.

At the core of their disagreement were conflicting fundamental beliefs and assumptions about America. A level of contention that certainly resonates in America today.

Green was a former soldier who believed that democracy, steered by the voices of citizens such as himself, would gradually generate the change he wished to see. Wright was a communist at the time, who saw only the entrenched interests of power and wealth gripping the nation until a revolution of the marginalized forced them to let go. For this he saw little hope.

Though more than 80 years have passed, I have doubts that either would have changed their position much, though they would very likely agree that we continue to face such challenges in the times in which we live.

- **Shaun Dozier**



Q&A with the POTH Creative Team Members

Serena Ebhardt, Executive Producer, David zum Brunnen, Executive Producer & Actor (Paul Green), Shaun Dozier, Director, J. Mardrice Henderson, Actor (Richard Wright), Ayana Johnson, Producer, and Ian Finley, co-screenwriter

1- How did you get involved with this project?

Ian - Serena & David invited me over to their house for an evening conversation on the back porch.... that was over ten years ago. Wow. David & Serena gave me a wide berth to explore the collaboration. I found a host of resources on Wright and Green's work together, their evolving friendship, and ultimately their parting of the ways.

Serena - Initially, it was conceived as a live theatrical play to be included in our [EbzB Productions] touring roster. We considered many different concepts, but ultimately decided on Paul Green's partnership with the groundbreaking novelist Richard Wright. In 1941 Wright asked Green to adapt his novel *Native Son* for the Broadway stage.

David - We knew when Ian sent us his first draft, he had generated something deeply compelling - particularly when you keep in mind the lives that both men led, not to mention their social justice activism. "We've truly got something here," I think Serena and I said to each other. Serena directed the stage play - workshopping it to touring the East coast of the U.S. Pre-Covid, we were encouraged to generate a screenplay.

Serena - Given Ian's pretty full schedule, he was only able to commit so much time, hence our addition of James A. Hodge, who came aboard as co-screenwriter. We sought out & leaned on numerous friends and peers to help us find the right team that could guide us. We pride ourselves on surrounding ourselves with those who 'know better than us.'

Shaun - Steve Milligan, the film's Director of Photography, with whom I had studied at Duke [University in Durham, NC] had referred me to David. Steve had committed to the project as D.P. and knew this might be a good fit for me - and a really great opportunity. David and I met, he was obviously enthusiastic about it. I read the stage script and I was quickly on board, even though there was further screenplay & conceptual work to do.

2- What was the most challenging aspect of making this film?

Shaun - Well, I guess we could certainly say that it was the Covid [pandemic] interruptions that caused us so much difficulty (We started filming in 2019, and completed post in 2022). I think David & Serena would likely say there were several more hurdles to surmount.

Serena - Securing the financial resources was a tough hurdle. It's an independent film, after all.

David - Serena likes to say that we ate a lot of peanut butter & jelly sandwiches. She's right. I liken it to us continually 'punching above our weight, if you will. We often work that way.

Serena - I remember David & Steve specifically seeking out a plethora of location options.

David - Perhaps the toughest location to secure was for the Central Prison filming - the negotiations. Then we had late summer thunderstorms brewing all around us with the winds picking up the night of shooting (after delaying the shot a few times prior), but we pulled it off.

Serena - I would also say that I watched David go through some pretty intense negotiations (spanning years) with both the Paul Green Foundation and The Wright Estate.

David - It would be disingenuous to try to tell you that both families are totally enamored & pleased with the portrayals of both men's positions. They've both expressed some reservation in a few instances on some choices in the telling of the story of these two men, but have ultimately offered their support to our approach. We're grateful to both parties involved.

3- What was the casting process?

Shaun - You know, the casting process was pretty straightforward actually. The two leads were easily set. J. Mardrice Henderson as Richard Wright - we knew who we wanted from the start of conceiving the film. Having David continue in the role of Paul Green was also a priority for the team (he's researched this man for years, if not over a decade). Others in the cast were either well-established artists in North Carolina or some coming in from Atlanta.

4- How did you achieve the tone of the film?

David - There are several factors. So I'll start with this - and that is that Steve Milligan (D.P.) is an artist - a true artist.

Ayana - Yes, credit both Shaun Dozier & Steve Milligan for the tone and the visual beauty of the film. We were all making sure to give them both the space they needed as we moved through each day on the set, as they made adjustments and wrestled with each shot. And I had to make sure to keep us on schedule at the same time! (laughter).

Shaun - The sense of ensemble was emphasized from the start and it remained throughout. The tone, the pacing, the concept of ensemble, and the very real sense that this result was going to be achieved through ensemble - it was all quite intentional.

Serena - The phenomenal writing, from Ian Finley and James A. Hodge, is key. The nuanced adjustments we made on set each day. Add the original music composed by Lenora Zenzalai Helm (particularly the song Freedom Time that courses through the film) and underscoring by Fred Story, and we have a carefully crafted relevant film.

Shaun - And Steve and I also had several cinematic styles & influences in our minds - Danish Director Lars Von Trier's Dogville, John Sales' Lonestar, the famed James Baldwin/William Buckley Cambridge debate, the My Dinner with Andre screenplay (though with a broader scope in locations and setting), and the film, Hunger, based on IRA leader Bobby Sands.

5- What should viewers expect when watching the film?

Serena - Perhaps it goes without saying, but the emphasis is on the dialogue - between two literary masters, both social justice activists, and the tandem exploration of issues of race, social justice, class, and personal story from which individual and creative agency flows.

Ian - And don't forget that this story is based on true-to-life events, though it is a fictionalized account of what happened between two renowned writers - 20th century literary giants.

J. - Audiences should expect to encounter two men they likely don't know much about, whose eventual impact on our world was remarkable in several ways.

David - As Ian has pointedly mentioned before - both men are right - in a sense - and their lack of resolution in how this friendship, their working relationship, and the ensuing conflict that unfolds is a profoundly American story & experience.

Serena - In other words, we've been affirmed in some of the initial screenings that this film resonates powerfully with the times in which we live.

Shaun - The true power of the film lies in its gradual build over the full 85 minutes.

David - The goal was to present this story in as genuine a fashion and authentic tone as possible - and I think the entire team together was able to to accomplish that, where the whole is ultimately greater than the sum of its parts.

Shaun - Agreed.



CREATIVE TEAM



Shaun Dozier | Director

Shaun is a North Carolina native and recent graduate of Atlanta's SCAD MFA film program, and a graduate of Duke University. After his experimental thesis film, *For Natalie Who Left*, garnered him several university awards, Shaun went on to produce and direct documentaries in Peru, Brazil and Mexico. His first for Davis Projects for Peace, *Treading on Sand*, shows how a new form of democratic governance is transforming impoverished dunes of Lima, Peru. His feature screenplay for the short *A Burial Hymn* was a Sundance Writer's Lab finalist. Shaun lived in New York for 9 years and served as Dean at VOICE Charter School for three years before deciding to pursue the SCAD MFA.



Serena Ebhardt & David zum Brunnen | Executive Producers - WhyNot Theatricals & EbzB Productions

Since 1998 under Serena and David's direction, EbzB Productions (and its subsidiary WhyNot Theatricals) has toured nationally with numerous live theatrical productions; conducted community-based residencies; and produced projects for broadcast distribution that still air in US and Canadian markets. Among several statewide awards for their impact on the arts in North Carolina over the years, one tributed noted the company's "excellence, its exemplary work, and significant contribution to the dramatic arts in the state." Both Serena and David have appeared on stage, in film & TV with numerous projects in the US and Canada, including the company's stage production, *Native*, by Ian Finley.

Steve Milligan | Director of Photography

Steve is an accomplished career cinematographer with over fifteen years of experience. His last feature work, experimental filmmaker Josh Gibson's *Pig Film*, premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2018. Other samples of his work have been presented at Sundance, Tribeca, Toronto, SXSW, and dozens of other major film festivals around the world. Before shifting his attention to narrative

film, he worked with Kirby Dick (Twist of Faith, Invisible War) on his award-winning 2015 documentary Hunting Ground about rape on campus, as well as with many other distinguished directors, among them Brian McGinn (Chef's Table, Amanda Knox), Vanessa Roth (Freeheld, The Untouchables), Nancy Buirsky (The Loving Story), and Gary Hawkins (The Rough South of Larry Brown, Joe). Steve is also a Lecturing Fellow in the Cinematic Arts program at Duke University in Durham, NC where he teaches cinematography and related topics.



Ayana Johnson | Producer & Production Manager

Ayana is a producer, production manager, actress, casting director, and location scout, among other areas of experience in film and television. Based out of the Raleigh/Durham area of North Carolina, she also works with the Standardized Patient Program at Duke University as well as with a production company in performances for social change across country.

James A. Hodge | Screenplay

This will be the first screenplay for Mr. Hodge. The screenplay is adapted from the stage play, Native, by North Carolina playwright and previous North Carolina Piedmont-Laureate, Ian Finley.

CAST



J Mardrice Henderson | Richard Wright

J Mardrice Henderson is a graduate of UNC at Greensboro, receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Acting. A member of the Actor's Equity Association, he was featured as Ya'al in The Dance on Widow's Row by Samm-Art Williams at the National Black Theatre Festival. There, he also worked with TV legend, Ted Lange, in Blues in My Coffee by Ted Lange. J. Mardrice has toured with EbzB Productions as Richard Wright in NATIVE since 2017. J. Mardrice will also be featured in The Supremes at Earl's-All-You-Can-Eat Buffet.



David zum Brunnen | Paul Green

You've likely seen David on one screen or another at some point – but more than likely on the broadcast or computer screen. In a career that has spanned over thirty years, he's done a little bit of film, but most of his screen work has been on television. David's portrayal of Charles Dickens in *The Night Before Christmas Carol* has now been seen by millions nationally and internationally on public television.

Additionally, public television audiences have seen him - nationally and locally both as a performer – with his wife, Serena Ebhardt, in the national broadcast of EbzB's *War Bonds: The Songs & Letters of WWII* – and as a frequent spokesperson with UNC-TV in North Carolina. He's appeared in various commercials, small films, and other media, but it's the public television broadcasts where his appearances continue to air. Over the decades, he's also directed non-profit cultural organizations (both large & small), served as a consultant to numerous groups, and been a political and arts activist at the local, regional, & state levels - among other civic endeavors.



CREDITS

The Problem of the Hero

a WhyNot Theatricals film

Executive Producers

EbzB Productions
Serena Ebhardt & David zum Brunnen

Producer

AyJ Productions
Ayana Johnson

Producer

Gravel Films

Directed by

Shaun Dozier

Screenplay by

James A. Hodge and Ian Finley

Director of Photography

Steve Milligan

CAST

Richard Wright - J. Mardrice Henderson

Paul Green - David zum Brunnen