



NATIVE SON

A film by Pierre Chenal

1951 / Argentina / 108 min. / In English

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About NATIVE SON:

One of the most controversial novels of its day, Richard Wright's NATIVE SON (published in 1940) exposed the injustices of urban African American life, witnessed through the eyes of Bigger Thomas, whose violent tendencies and moral confusion were the inevitable result of generations of institutionalized racism. Kino Lorber presents a new restoration of the film, presented in association with the Library of Congress, Fernando Martin Peña and Argentina Sono Film. The film is preceded by a special filmed introduction by film historians Eddie Muller (Film Noir Foundation) and Jacqueline Stewart (co-curator of Kino Lorber's PIONEERS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CINEMA), courtesy of Turner Classic Movies.

Raised in the slums of Chicago, small-time hoodlum Bigger Thomas (Richard Wright) is offered an opportunity for advancement when he is hired as chauffeur for the Daltons, a family of wealthy liberals. While putting the intoxicated daughter Mary (Jean Wallace) to bed after an evening of nightclubbing, Thomas is in a panic, fully realizing the impossible risk he has been forced to take, and he accidentally suffocates her. He burns her body in a furnace to hide the evidence and blames her disappearance on kidnappers. After confessing the crime to his girlfriend Bessie (Gloria Madison), who encourages him to turn himself in to the police, Thomas murders her and disposes of her body in an abandoned building. Bigger is inevitably apprehended, jailed, and, despite the efforts of a Communist attorney (Don Dean), is sentenced to die. Imprisoned and visited by his family, Thomas reflects on the circumstances that led to his fate.

About the Production

A former Communist Party activist (he left the party in 1942), Wright was blacklisted in Hollywood and surveilled by the FBI. He found greater acceptance among the literati of Paris and later Buenos Aires, which had a thriving film industry that exported its products to Spain and Latin America. Producer Jamie Prades offered Wright the irresistible opportunity to adapt his “unfilmable” novel to the screen, under the direction of Belgium-born filmmaker Pierre Chenal. American reviewers of the censored version targeted Wright’s age and lack of acting experience, and asked why Canada Lee (who had starred in Orson Welles’s celebrated 1941 stage adaptation) was not offered the role, without realizing that Lee was older than Wright and very ill. Chenal had difficulty casting the role because actors feared blacklisting or other forms of reprisal. He thought that Wright would bring an extra pathos to Bigger Thomas and convinced him to accept the role —making it an extremely rare example of an author playing the central role in a screen adaptation of his/her work. As J. Hoberman wrote in *The New York Times*, “Wright’s presence gives *NATIVE SON* an avant-garde quality.”

NATIVE SON was the first English-language film produced by an Argentinian studio — a lavish production that required the recreation of a Chicago slum on the backlots of Argentina Sono Film. Not surprisingly, the major studios refused to release *NATIVE SON* in the U.S. It was eventually released by the independent Classic Pictures.

About the Restoration

When it was initially released in the U.S., *NATIVE SON* was heavily censored by regional state/municipal censor boards where it played. A complete 16mm print of the original Argentinian release version was located in 1999 by film archivist Fernando Martin Peña in Buenos Aires. The Library of Congress subsequently located an incomplete 35mm duplicate negative of the uncensored cut in Puerto Rico. These two elements were combined for the current restoration, the most complete version of *NATIVE SON* ever shown in the United States.

Special thanks to Edgardo Krebs for his years of research into the making and recovery of *NATIVE SON*, and for being a tireless champion of its restoration and re-release. *NATIVE SON* is under license from Argentina Sono Film.

Crew

Directed by Pierre Chenal

Writing Credits Pierre Chenal - Richard Wright (novel)

Produced by Walter Gould

Music by Juan Ehlert

Cinematography by Antonio Merayo

Film Editing by Jorge Gárate

Costume Design by Eduardo Lerchundi

Makeup Department Alberto Neron

Art Department Gori Muñoz

Sound Department Mario Fezia & Charles Marin

Camera Operator Julio Dasso

Cast

Richard Wright - Bigger Thomas

Jean Wallace Jean Wallace - Mary Dalton

Nicholas Joy Nicholas Joy - Henry Dalton

Gloria Madison - Bessie Mears

Charles Cane - Det. Britten

George Rigaud - Farley, a reporter

George D. Green - Panama

Willa Pearl Curtis - Mrs. Hannah Thomas

Gene Michael - Jan Erlone

Don Dean - Max

Ned Campbell - Buckley

Ruth Robert - Helen Dalton

George Nathanson - Joe, a reporter

Georges Roos - Scoop

Lewis MacKenzie - Stanley