

KINO LORBER

REPERTORY

Presents



The Olive Trees Of Justice

A Film by James Blue

****Winner: Prize of the Society of Film and Television Writers –
Cannes Film Festival (1962)****

Official Selection – New York Film Festival (1963)

France | 1962 | 81 mins | French with English subtitles

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Synopsis:

The first and only narrative feature by American documentarian James Blue (Oscar-nominated for *A Few Notes On Our Food Problem*), *The Olive Trees Of Justice* holds the dual distinctions of being the only French film to have been shot during the Algerian War, and to have been the winner of the Prize of the Society of Film and Television Writers at the inaugural Critics' Week at the Cannes Film Festival in 1962

Filmed in Algiers and the surrounding countryside during the late stages of the Algerian War, under the pretext that it was a documentary about the wine industry, the film depicts the Algerian struggle for independence from the French by concentrating on a young "pied-noir" (Frenchman of Algerian descent) who returns to Algiers to visit his dying father. His memories of boyhood on his father's farm are told in flashbacks with a lush serenity that contrasts to the teeming, tank-filled streets of contemporary Algiers.

Giving the film a neorealist tone by shooting in a documentary style and enrolling a cast that consisted largely of non-professional actors, including author Jean Pelegri who wrote the autobiographical novel from which the film is based, Blue tells a powerful story of common people living and struggling in their daily lives while providing a valuable testimony to the complexity of the Algerian situation in that time period.

About the Production:

The Olive Trees Of Justice is the only French film to have been shot during the Algerian War.

James Blue co-wrote the script and directed the 1962 feature, *The Olive Trees Of Justice*, based on Jean Pelegri's prize-winning novel of the same title.

Unlike other films of this period, it surprises on several counts: for having been made in the midst of the conflict, for the writer whose book inspired the film, and for its young American director and his intention in making the film. It was made by an Algeria-based company, Société Algérienne de Production des Studios Africa (SAPSA), run by Georges Derocles. An atypical person, Derocles also produced short films for Eric Rohmer and Albert Lamorisse.

The film was shot in 1961 with support from CNC in very challenging and almost clandestine circumstances. The cast were non-professional actors and the entire crew was Algerian.

The man who wrote the book of the same title was Jean Pélégri, a pied-noir of humble Spanish origin. He went on to become a professor of the arts in France, a well-known author of novels published by Gallimard, and an occasional actor in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket*. For this film, which tells the story of his own family, he co-wrote the script, was lead production assistant and

played the part of the father. His vision for Algeria was universal, and he was highly regarded by and close to many Algerian intellectuals.

To approach such a sensitive subject, Derocles chose, on the advice of Jacques Dormeyer, an American director, James Blue, who graduated from the prestigious IDHEC in 1958, at the same time as Costa-Gavras.

James Blue gave the film the tone and style of a documentary, the genre in which he would go on to become a prominent figure (his 1969 film *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem* was nominated for the Best Documentary Oscar). A highly socially engaged man, he left his mark on a generation of American documentary makers through his work and various university programmes, despite his premature death at 50 years of age.

Accepted as an enduring classic, the structure of *The Olive Trees Of Justice* is a seamless forward-moving narrative present with flashbacks to the past memories of childhood. Blue paid homage to John Ford in the rural setting and shot the urban street scenes like Roberto Rossellini's neo-realism. Part of the film is shot in a very different style, that of the recently innovated cinema verite which Jean Rouch and Richard Leacock had just instituted in France and the United States.

The film, seductive in its style, focuses on the character of the father, who was one of the first settlers to grow vines on the Mitidja Plain. Portrayed as a benefactor, he proudly states, "It was the Arabs who taught me what fairness is," and he places himself above the fighting that is tearing Algeria apart. The position defended by his son, "The country must be for everyone, or else there's no country," while arguable, is sincerely expressed. For its authenticity, and even its ambiguities, the film is a valuable testimony to the complexity of the Algerian situation in that period.

Upon release, it created a controversy on both the right and the left. Cameraman Julius Rascheff described how the editing rooms were bombed several times during the production, which itself included a scene of a terrorist's bomb in the streets. It was the only fiction feature made in Algeria during the war years.

About the Restoration:

Restored in 4K in 2020 by L'Atelier d'Images and Thierry Derocles in collaboration with The James and Richard Blue Foundation with the support of The Film Foundation, James Ivory and CNC – Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, at L'Image Retrouvée (Paris) from a fine grain print preserved at Les Archives Françaises du Film.

Note from Richard Blue:

The Olive Trees of Justice was produced by Georges Derocles, for whom my brother worked making other short films in Algeria. Teaming up with Jean Pelegri, himself a Pied Noir, James and Jean wrote the script, based on an autobiographical novel by Pelegri of the same name. It was filmed in Algeria during the conflict, using non-actors. The film was first screened at Cannes where it was awarded the Prize of the Society of Film and Television Writers. It received very favorable reviews from French film critics but was not a commercial success.

Derocles gave James the North American rights to the film when James left France in 1962. Returning to the USA, James tried to find a distributor, but was told the film would not be of interest: "no sex, no violence". As his sole survivor, I now own those "rights".

Beginning in 2014, The James Blue Alliance, a foundation I created to promote my brother's work, began raising funds to restore *The Olive Trees Of Justice*. This was suggested to us by James Ivory, who saw a scratchy and brittle 16mm version screened in Portland. Ivory was a classmate of James Blue at the University of Oregon. CNC contributed as well.

Working with John Ptak, who knew James at AFI, and with Marina Girard in Paris, and with great support from The National Film Preservation Foundation, Martin Scorsese Film Foundation, and the French Cinema Foundation, with support from Costa Gavras & Bertrand Tavernier, plus some generous private donors, we raised the necessary \$100,000 plus to restore the film. This restoration is now complete.

Director's Bio:

James Blue (October 10, 1930, Tulsa, Oklahoma – June 14, 1980, Buffalo, New York)

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| 1948-1953 | B.A. Degree at University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon |
| 1955-1956 | Graduate Work in the Department of Theater, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon |
| 1956-1958 | Studied cinematography at L'Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC). Paris, France |
| 1959-1962 | Worked for Georges Derocles' Les Studios Africa (Georges Derocles) in Algiers, Algeria, a private company from which the French government often ordered |

- films. Blue produced seven short films, silent farces mainly intended for the Muslim population, and the documentary *Amal* (1960), commissioned by the French government.
- 1961-1962 Co-author and director of *The Olive Trees Of Justice*, produced by Les Studios Africa and based on a novel by Jean Pelegri. This sole fiction feature film by Blue won the Prize of the Society of Film and Television Writers at the 1962 Cannes Film Festival.
- 1962-1968 Directed five documentary films for the film division of the United States Information Agency (USIA). Blue directed the "Colombian Trilogy" on the Alliance for Progress - the three short films *A Letter From Colombia* (1962), *The School at Rincon Santo* (1962) and *Evil Wind Out* (1962); and also *The March* (1963-1964) about the civil rights March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs, August 28, 1963. His last documentary, *A Few Notes On Our Food Problem* (1968), on the improvement of worldwide agricultural production, was Blue's first color film. It was nominated for an Academy Award for Documentary Feature in 1969.
- 1964 Grant from the Ford Foundation for a research project on film-making consisting of interviews with international directors, starting with Albert and David Maysles. Initially, Blue was interested in the use of non-actors, cinema verite and Direct Cinema style.
- 1964-1980 Later Blue extended this interview project to include historians, critics, new ethnographic documentary filmmakers and actors. Up to his death, Blue conducted more than 75 interviews.
- 1964 Teaching fellow for filmmaking at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
- 1964-1969 Contributed several essays and interviews to the magazine *Film Comment*. A cornerstone of its editorial staff.
- 1969 Teaching fellow at the Center for Advanced Film Studies, American Film Institute (AFI), Los Angeles. Blue set up its facility and assisted in organizing its curriculum.
- 1970-1975 Faculty member of the Media Center, first located at St. Thomas College, Houston, and later at Rice University, Houston, Texas. The Media Center, where Blue inaugurated the film-making program, was founded by Gerald O'Grady with funding from Jean and Dominique de Men ii. Blue was its Co-Director (together with David MacDougall) from 1970-1975.
- 1971-1974 Co-Director (together with David MacDougall) of the pioneering five-part ethnographic film project *Kenya Boran*. It was part of the Faces of Change project, a collaboration between anthropologists and filmmakers that included 25 films shot in countries such as Afghanistan and Bolivia, produced by the American University Field Staff under director Norman Miller and funded by the National Science Foundation.
- 1972 Member of the Public Media Advisory Committee of the National Endowments of the Arts (NEA). In following years Blue served as a number of its committees and

- was recipient of two of its production grants.
- 1976 Initiator (together with Ed Hugetz) of the weekly television series *The Territory*, starting with a grant from the NEA as filmmaker-in-residence. The program at the public television station KUHT-TV, Channel 8 in Houston began broadcasting in 1977, featuring independent films, videos, and digital arts with an emphasis on Southwestern media artists, and is still operating to this day.
- 1976-1980 With the documentaries *Who Killed Fourth Ward?* (1976-1977) and *The Invisible City* (1979-1980) Blue developed the Complex Urban Documentary a Process-oriented documentary film style for local television employing formal Experimentation, interactive elements and audience feedback.
- 1977 Founded the Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP), an independent non-profit media arts center in Houston intended to create audiences and Opportunities for regional film and video-making (still operating today).
- 1977 Lecture series "The Documentary Impulse" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York
- 1979 Initiator (together with Producer Lynn Corcoran) and Executive Producer of the television series *The Frontier*, broadcast on the public television station WNED-TV Channel 7 in Buffalo. The program showcased the work of independent video and filmmakers from Western New York and Southern Ontario.
- 1977-1980 Professor of Documentary Film at the Department of Media Study, State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo, NY.
- 1980 Taught filmmaking at the National Film School of Great Britain, London, (invited by the director Colin Young).

Filmography:

Hamlet, USA, 1951-1952, 8mm film, 40 min

The Silver Spur, USA, 1956, 16mm film

Paris à l'Aube (with Johan van der Keuken), France, 1957, 35mm film, color, 10 min
Une Tragédie en Trois Mauvaises Actions, France, IDHEC, 1958, 35mm film, 5 min

Amal, Algeria, 1960, 35mm film, b/w, sound, 21 min, written and directed by: James Blue, cinematographer: Paul Fougerol, produced by: Les Studios Africa/Georges Derocles, produced for. Direction de l'Agriculture et des Forêts, © Georges Derocles

Le Voleur, Algeria, 1960, 35mm film, b/w, silent, 20 min

La Princesse Muette, Algeria, 1960, 35mm film, b/w, silent, 12 min *L'Avare*, Algeria, 1960, 35mm film, b/w, silent, short

Le Jardin des Roses, Algeria, 1960, 35mm film, b/w, silent, 18 min *L'Endormi*, Algeria, 1961, 35mm film, b/w, silent, 10 min

Le Menuisier, Algeria, 1961, 35mm film, b/w, silent, 10 min *Le Match-de-Catch*, Algeria, 1961, 35mm film, b/w, silent, 12 min

Les Oliviers de la Justice [The Olive Trees of Justice], Algeria/France, 1962, 35mm film, b/w, sound, 78 min, written by: Jean Pelegri, Sylvain Dhomme, James Blue, after a novel by: Jean Pelegri (1956, Editions Gallimard, Paris), directed by: James Blue, dialogue: Jean Pelegri, cinematographer: Julius Rascheff with Ouakil Boubekeur, edited by: Suzanne Gaveau, Marie-Claude Bariset, music: Maurice Jarre, produced by: Les Studio Africa/Georges Derocles, © Georges Derocles

A Letter from Colombia, Colombia/USA, 1962, 35mm film, b/w sound, 9:30 min, written, directed, and narrated by: James Blue, cinematographer: Stevan Lamer, produced by: United States Information Agency (USIA)

The School at Rincon Santo, Colombia/USA, 1962, 35mm film, b/w, sound, 10:40 min, written, directed and narrated by: James Blue, cinematographer: Stevan Lamer, produced by: United States Information Agency (USIA)

Evil Wind Out, Colombia/USA, 1962, 35mm film, b/w, sound, 10 min, written, directed and narrated by: James Blue, cinematographer: Stevan Lamer, produced by: United States Information Agency (USIA)

The March (The March on Washington, August 28, 1963), USA, 1963-1964, 35mm film, b/w, sound, 32 min, directed and narrated by: James Blue, produced by: United States Information Service (USIS)

A Few Notes on Our Food Problem, Taiwan/India/Kenya/Brazil/USA, 1968, 35mm film, color, sound, 35 min, written, directed and narrated by: James Blue, cinematographer and co-director: Stevan Lamer, co-written by: Gill Dennis, edited by: Lee Alexander, Meyer Odze, produced by: United States Information Agency (USIA)

Karate Texas (with David MacDougall), USA, 1971-1973, Super 8 film, color, unfinished

Kenya Boran, Parts I and II (with David MacDougall), 1974, 16mm film, color, sound, 66 min, directed by: James Blue, David MacDougall, cinematographer: David MacDougall, sound: James Blue, produced by: Norman Miller in cooperation with National Film School of Great

Britain and the ministry of Natural Resources, Government of Kenya, with a grant from the National Science Foundation (USA)

Boran Herdsmen (with David MacDougall), 1974, 16mm film, color, 20 min

Boran Women (with David MacDougall), 1974, 16mm film, color, 20 min

Harambee – “Pull Together” (with David MacDougall), 1974, 16mm film, color, 20 min

Who Killed Fourth Ward? A non-fiction Mystery in Three Parts, USA, 1976-1977, Super 8 film, transferred to 2-inch video for broadcast, color, sound, produced and directed by: James Blue, cinematographer: Brian Huberman, sound and edited by: Ed Hugetz, with: Tom Wright (Journalist), produced with support from: Media Center at Rice University, Houston, Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP), National Endowment for the Arts, KUHT-TV, Channel 8, Houston, TX,

The Invisible City (Houston’s Housing Crisis) (with Adèle Naudé Santos), USA, 1979, Super 8 film and 2 inch video, color, sound, directed by: James Blue, Adèle Naudé Santos, video and film production: Lynn Corcoran, Tom Sims, produced with support from: Texas Committee for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Humanities, KUHT-TV, Channel 8, Houston, TX, Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP), produced by: SWAMP, humanist advisors: Baruch Brody (Rice University, Houston, Chairman Dept. Philosophy), June Holly (Director, Houston Committee for the Humanities and Public Policy), Harold Hyman (Rice University, Chairman Dept. Sociology), Naomi Lede’ (TSU, Director of Research, Urban Resources Center), William Simon (University of Houston, Professor of Sociology), Maria-Luisa Urdaneta (University of Texas, San Antonio, Medical Anthropologist), Douglas Uzzell (SMU, Urban Anthropologist)

The Invisible City (Summary) (with Adèle Naudé Santos), USA, 1980, Super 8 film and 2 inch video, color, sound, 60 min, directed by: James Blue, Adèle Naudé Santos, video and film production: Lynn Corcoran, Tom Sims, produced with support from: Texas Committee for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Humanities, KUHT-TV, Channel 8, Houston, TX, Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP), produced by: SWAMP, humanist advisors: Baruch Brody (Rice University, Houston, Chairman Dept. Philosophy), June Holly (Director, Houston Committee for the Humanities & Public Policy), Harold Hyman (Rice University, Chairman Dept. Sociology), Naomi Lede’ (TSU, Director of Research, Urban Resources Center), William Simon (University of Houston, Professor of Sociology), Maria-Luisa Urdaneta (University of Texas, San Antonio, Medical Anthropologist), Douglas Uzzell (SMU, Urban Anthropologist)