

King Solomon's Mines at Otto's Bluff

Paul Robeson, the famous actor, singer and a pioneer of the black civil rights movement in the United States, never set foot in South Africa. Despite that, he is the star of a film shot on location just outside Pietermaritzburg, a film that Robeson considered an important milestone in his career.

The film was *King Solomon's Mines*, based on the novel by H. Rider Haggard, and the main location was a royal homestead erected at the foot of Otto's Bluff. When the film was made, during 1936 and 1937, Robeson was at the height of his singing and acting career.

The son of an ex-slave, Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey, on 9 April 1898. His artistic and political career spanned over four decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s.

Robeson took to the stage at the urging of his wife Eslanda (Essie) in 1921 while studying law at Columbia University, New York. In 1922 he became professionally involved and by 1924 had turned his back on a legal career. In the years that followed, Robeson appeared in several plays, including Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones*. His professional singing career was launched in 1925 at a highly successful concert in New York.

Primarily a stage actor, Robeson made only eleven films. Initially he had high hopes for the medium, believing the film industry could be used 'to break the stereotype Negro usually portrayed and to present the Negro as a human being'. However the film industry appeared to be only interested in the stereotypes: 'the Negro of Poor Old Joe and Swanee Ribber'. With the success of the film version of *The Emperor Jones* (1933) Robeson hoped producers would see the 'potential in the number of films that could be filmed starring a Negro – films that could use an African setting. Among the characters in which Robeson saw potential were the Negro Emperors Menelik and Shaka; and Rider Haggard's Zulu King, Umbopa, from *King Solomon's Mines*.¹

Robeson never played Menelik or Shaka, though he did play the fictional Umbopa in the 1937 version of *King Solomon's Mines*. After *The Emperor Jones* Robeson made *Sanders of the River* (1935), based on the novel by Edgar Wallace. He embarked on it with high hopes, confident it would 'bring African culture to the screen [and] also establish a more dignified image of the Negro, one that would be far removed from the old stereotypes.' In the event the film proved an embarrassment and Robeson's portrayal of his character Bosambo's 'doglike devotion' to his white master was to be held against him for many years.²

Robeson vowed he would never do another film reinforcing racial stereotypes and began making amends by narrating the prologue and singing the theme song for a documentary film about South Africa, *My Song Goes Forth* (also known as *Africa Sings and Africa Looks Up*) (1936).³

In his next film, *Showboat* (1936), Robeson recreated his stage character Joe, singing the song 'Ol' Man River' that became synonymous with his name. Then came *The Song of Freedom* (1936) in which he played John Zinga, a London dockworker, whose wonderful bass voice launches him on a spectacular career during the course of which he discovers he is the king of an African kingdom. Zinga then turns his back on success to serve his people in Africa. The film was made for Gaumont-British, who then cast Robeson for the starring role in *King Solomon's Mines*.

During 1936, in the interval between the completion of *The Song of Freedom* and the shooting of *King Solomon's Mines*, Robeson visited the Soviet Union, passing up the chance to come to South Africa with his wife Essie and their son Pauli. According to his son this was partly because 'both the British and South African authorities opposed his going'.⁴ According to Essie he was also concerned about protecting his voice. However, Robeson's biographer Martin Duberman suggests marital tensions may also have played a role.

When Robeson returned from the Soviet Union he joined the other cast members of *King Solomon's Mines* to begin filming in London under the direction of Robert Stevenson. (Stevenson later joined the Walt Disney stable, where he made several films, including *Mary Poppins* (1964).)

King Solomon's Mines is a curious hybrid, part-adventure, part-musical, in which Robeson sings four songs. Shot in black and white, it was the first talking version based on Haggard's 1886 novel. Robeson plays Umbopa, who goes in search of the fabled King Solomon's Mines accompanied by Allan Quatermain (Cedric Hardwicke), Sir Henry Curtis (John Loder), Captain Good (Roland Young) and Kathy O'Brien, played by Anna Lee. The latter character does not appear in the book and only the bare bones of Haggard's narrative survive on screen. Once at the site of King Solomon's Mines the adventurers encounter the evil Twala, upstart king of the Kukuana. When Umbopa is revealed as the true heir to throne he is helped by his white compatriots to overthrow Twala.⁵

Robeson was the undoubted star of the film and gets top billing in the screen credits, but in reality none of the credited cast came to South Africa. All their scenes, including interiors, and some exteriors with painted backdrops, were shot at the Lime Grove Studios, Shepherd's Bush, London. Filming the stars under controlled conditions in the studio and sending out second units to shoot the more problematic location material was a standard practice of the time.

In the completed film Robeson can be seen apparently striding around Otto's Bluff and the Umgeni valley, leading a team of oxen drawing a wagon, while robustly singing 'there'll be a waterhole soon, we'll come to the waterhole soon'. Robeson's close-ups were shot in England against a background of sky so they could be intercut with the location footage without causing continuity problems. In long shot, where his face is not visible, a stand-in was used.

A front title credit – 'African Exteriors directed by Geoffrey Barkas / Photographed by Cyril J. Knowles' – acknowledges the key members of the film unit that came to South Africa.

They arrived in Pietermaritzburg on Tuesday 17 November 1936, and put up at the Imperial Hotel. The unit was led by Barkas and his wife Natalie, who was both production secretary and in charge of continuity. Barkas and his wife came to South Africa after having shot location footage for *Soldiers Three* (no date) in India and *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) in Rhodesia.⁶ As well as the cameraman, Cyril Knowles, they were accompanied by production manager T. D. Connochie and assistant cameraman Geoffrey Unsworth. They were joined at the Imperial Hotel by E.C. Travail, a Johannesburg architect employed as construction engineer and art director.

The Natal Witness reported that the rest of the unit, plus stand-ins to double for the stars and extras, were due in three weeks' time, and that filming would take place around Pietermaritzburg and in the Umgeni valley until the end of February. The film was scheduled to be completed five weeks after the unit returned to Britain.



Allan Quatermain, Captain Good, Katy O'Brien and Sir Henry Curtis seeking an audience with King Twala. Stand-ins on location at Otto's Bluff. The only stand-in who can be identified with certainty is Constance Barritt. The credited actors who played these roles were Cedric Hardwicke, Roland Young, Anna Lee and John Loder. (Production still)

The stars could not 'be spared to take the long journey to this country,' Geoffrey Barkas explained. 'It therefore falls to the director and his company to see that the scenes "shot" here will fit in with those produced under such different conditions in England.' Weather conditions for one. 'While appreciating the great benefit of the rains to the country at this time Mr Barkas is hoping the weather will clear before the time for filming.' Rain was making it difficult to get to the main location at Otto's Bluff, where a huge royal homestead was being built.

Weather was also cause for concern to Natalie Barkas, who was interviewed by *The Natal Witness* for the regular Wednesday feature 'A Page of Personalities' on 25 November. "'I have always heard about the brilliant flowers and dreadful hailstorms of

South Africa but have always credited the person who told me with a lively imagination. After Saturday's storm, I know that it is the plain, unvarnished truth," said Mrs Barkas.'

'At present the weather is causing Mr Barkas a good deal of trouble for with the roads in the present state it is almost impossible to get out to the location.' Mrs Barkas hoped there would be fine weather by the time the rest of the unit arrived.

The Natal Witness reporter described how a bedroom at the Imperial Hotel had been turned into a 'businesslike office' to oversee the making of a feature film requiring 'contracts and concessions from the Government, Native Affairs Department, the railways and private contractors.'

Natalie Barkas explained how her continuity work would involve matching exteriors to studio scenes. '[She] showed me a queer little machine which she called a Movieola,' wrote the reporter. 'In it copies of the studio scenes are run off and it is thus possible to check up on them, avoiding any discrepancies which might otherwise creep in.'

To help match shots, stand-ins were used for all the principals. Robeson's was probably Benjamin Kubeka. Six feet, two inches in height and weighing 16 stone, he came from Sophiatown, Johannesburg. According to the *Witness* he was of royal Swazi descent and brother-in-law of Arthur Edward Mshiyeni Ka Dinuzulu, Regent Chief of the Zulus and a brother of the late King Solomon Ka Dinuzulu. 'He had been an interpreter to the Native Commissioner's Court in Johannesburg, a deputy special messenger, a caddy master at a well known club, and for thirteen years a bus driver.'⁷

Once the set was complete and all the stand-ins and extras had arrived, filming commenced at Otto's Bluff. This choice of location was fortuitous as, coincidentally, it has a connection with Haggard himself. There is a tradition in the Otto family (after whom the bluff is named) that the young Haggard stayed with them as a learner-farmer.



The final battle scene being filmed at Otto's Bluff. (Production still)

According to this story Haggard was hopeless at farming, preferring instead to spend his time thinking up his African romances while resting in the shade of a particular rock.

A nice story, but that's all it is. Though Haggard lived in Maritzburg for a couple of years in the mid 1870s, he was employed as an unpaid supernumerary on the staff of the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, Sir Henry Bulwer. Haggard would have known the Ottos socially, and probably went hunting on their land, but he never farmed there, though he did farm outside Newcastle for about six months in 1881 before returning to England to find fame as an author. He later became a respected farmer and a noted agricultural authority.



One of the South African extras who appears, uncredited, as an induna in the final film. (Production still)

A Pietermaritzburg resident and member of the Otto family, the late Ruth Carr, together with her late husband Errol, once owned the farm that includes Otto's Bluff. At the time of filming the farm belonged to her father, R.J.P. Otto. She recalled how lunch was brought out to the set each day from the Imperial Hotel and how she and a friend helped serve tea and cold drinks in the catering tent. From her subsequent correspondence with Natalie Barkas it is possible to identify the stand-in for Anna Lee as Constance Barritt.

During filming the weather did indeed prove a problem and a former Maritzburg resident, the late Peter Watkins, who watched the filming as a child while holidaying in the area, recalled Barkas singing a song with the refrain: 'We came to Africa to see the sun – and we didn't see none'.

Filming was not without impact on the life of the city. At a hearing of the Rural Licensing Board, *The Natal Witness* of January 19 1937 reported that a Chief Bekamashi 'would have given evidence in support of an application for a fresh produce and mineral water licence at Camperdown but for the fact he had become a film actor and a second Paul Robeson.' Sokise, an induna representing Chief Bekamashi, gave evidence on his behalf but the licence application, from a Mr Moodley, was refused.

The production unit also contributed to the social life of the capital. 'Gay Cabaret at Imperial Hotel' reads a headline in *The Natal Witness* of Monday 1 February, which reports how Maritzburg residents took advantage of a fine evening the previous Saturday for a dinner-cum-cabaret at the Imperial Hotel. One of the Gaumont-British contingent, a Mr Sam Lee, 'gave a most amusing burlesque of a woman ballet dancer, and followed it with a snake charmer's dance, his contortions and clever steps and movements drawing forth loud applause and peels of laughter from the spectators.'

That evening seems to have been the film unit's swansong. The production finished around this time and all those involved returned to England. The completed film was released later that year.

Duberman records that the black New York *Amsterdam News* 'expressed its gratitude that the film "at least doesn't reek with the imperialistic theory of British superiority"' (most viewers today would find that reek palpable), but the black *Pittsburgh Courier* was wholly negative: 'Robeson "is made to sing childish lyrics to dreary tunes in the most unlikely circumstances."' ⁸

On 18 August 1937 Natalie Barkas wrote to the young Ruth Carr concerning the London run of the film: 'It had very good notices – all the papers were particularly pleased with the scenes taken at Otto's Bluff. They said that Mr. Barkas has captured the atmosphere of Africa and handled his crowds of natives with remarkable skill.'

Today the film is something of a curiosity, of interest because of the presence of Robeson and the final reel which climaxes with a spectacular battle sequence, which includes the firing of the royal homestead at Otto's Bluff, followed by a volcanic eruption (filmed in Shepherd's Bush). Pietermaritzburg residents will enjoy watching familiar scenery otherwise rarely captured on film.

The later careers of those involved in the filming around Pietermaritzburg are, in the main, unrecorded. The names of Barkas or Knowles are not to be found in any of the standard film reference books. However Geoffrey Barkas popped up again as Director of Camouflage, Middle East Operations during World War Two and was involved in the deception operation for Alamein which he and his wife Natalie wrote about in their book *The Camouflage Story*.

However, one member of the film crew did indeed attain lasting cinematic fame – the assistant cameraman, Geoffrey Unsworth. He went on to become an innovative cinematographer, winning an Oscar for *Cabaret* (1972) and celebrated for his work on a host of films including *A Night to Remember* (1958), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Superman* (1978).

As for Paul Robeson, the star of *King Solomon's Mines*, his film career faded, taking a back seat to his singing career and his increasing involvement in politics. His records were later banned on South African radio because of his opposition to apartheid. He died in 1976.

NOTES

1. Schlosser, Anatol I., Paul Robeson in Film: An Iconoclast's Quest for a Role, p.72 in The Editors of *Freedomways, Paul Robeson: The Great Forerunner*, (New York, 1978).
2. *ibid.*, p.75
3. For details and discussion of this film see Davis, Peter, *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the jungles of cinema's South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1996, p.142.
4. Duberman, Martin Bauml, *Paul Robeson*, London, 1989, pp. 204–205. See also Chapter 10: 'Berlin, Moscow, Films (1934–1937)'.
5. Film versions of *King Solomon's Mines*: *King Solomon's Mines* (1919). African Film Productions. South Africa. Directed by H. Lisle Luecoque *King Solomon's Mines* (1937). Gaumont-British. Director: Robert Stevenson. First talking version. Paul Robeson as Umbopa, Cedric Hardwicke as Allan Quatermain, John Loder as Sir Henry Curtis and Roland Young as Captain Good. *King Solomon's Mines* (1950). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Director: Compton Burnett. Stewart Granger as Allan Quatermain, Deborah Kerr as Elizabeth Curtis and Richard Carlson as Captain Good. Second unit directed by Andrew Marton.

Maciste in King Solomon's Mines. Late 1950s. One of an Italian film series featuring Maciste, a Samson-like hero. Here he was played by South African muscleman Reg Park.

King Solomon's Mines (1985). Directed by J. Lee Thompson. Richard Chamberlain as Allan Quatermain. Also starred Sharon Stone, Herbert Lom, John Rhys-Davies and Ken Gampu.

Watusi (1959). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Stars George Montgomery as Allan Quatermain's son Harry retracing his father's steps to King Solomon's Mines.

6. See Barkas, Geoffrey and Natalie, *Thirty Thousand Miles for the Films: The Story of the Filming of 'Soldiers Three' and 'Rhodes of Africa'*, London, 1937.
7. *The Natal Witness*, 18 December 1936.
8. Duberman, p.207.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barkas, Geoffrey and Natalie. *The Camouflage Story: from Aintree to El Alamein*, London, 1952.

Barkas, Geoffrey and Natalie. *Thirty Thousand Miles for the Films: The Story of the Filming of 'Soldiers Three' and 'Rhodes of Africa'*, London, 1937.

Beresford-Ellis, Peter. *Rider Haggard: A Voice from the Infinite*, London, 1978.

Davis, Peter. *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the jungles of cinema's South Africa*, Johannesburg, 1996.

Duberman, Martin Bauml. *Paul Robeson*, London, 1989.

The Editors of *Freedomways*. *Paul Robeson: The Great Forerunner*, New York, 1978. (See Anatol I. Schlosser, Paul Robeson in Film: *An Iconoclast's Quest for a Role*, p 72.)

Halliwell, Leslie. *Halliwell Filmgoer's Companion*, (11th edition edited by John Walker), London, 1995.

STEPHEN COAN

This article found its genesis in several interviews with the late Ruth Carr who made letters and photographs available to the author. It is a longer version of the article published in The Natal Witness on 30 December 1998.