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Ebony Films' *Spying the Spy* Is

Asking the Questions

Benjamin "Shirley" Anderson

Modern audiences who dismiss racial caricature in old films as an inevitable symptom of the era fail to appreciate complex dialogues about representation which were happening during cinema's earliest days. Entire studio systems existed and competed for the audiences and actors excluded by Hollywood during the first quarter century. They endeavored to articulate the intricacies of American racial identity and redefine the image of the African American, as is indicated in the 1994 PBS movie, *Midnight Ramble*. Some studios were self-financed while others were financed by white production teams. The success or failure of these studios was determined by the satisfaction of an audience's demand for improved African-American experiences on both sides of the silver screen.

The Ebony Film Company in Chicago allows an excellent angle of examination into those demands. The Ebony Film Company is infamous for closing due to boycotts. Although Ebony's players and president were African American, the studio had a white parent company. Before rebranding, they produced vaudeville comedies rife with vile stereotype (Hemann). A common narrative around the demise of The Ebony Film Company downplays the films' content and stresses studio practices. It is surmised that because the films of The Ebony Film Company were marketed to all audiences, not only African Americans, they were scrutinized harder than other studios. This scrutiny resulted in boycotts. This is often supported by the quote:

"...in a letter to George P. Johnson of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Pollard wrote that his comedies "proved to the public that colored players can put over good comedy without any of that crap shooting, chicken

stealing, razor display, watermelon eating stuff that the colored people generally have been a little disgusted in seeing. You do not find that stuff in Ebony comedies." (Hemann, quoted also in *Midnight Ramble*).

Examination of a surviving comedy by The Ebony Film Company, *Spying the Spy*, deepens the conversation further. Its narrative is a spoof of "The Klansman" story, viewed by audiences in various incarnations over a dozen years (*Midnight Ramble*). In the film, *Spying the Spy*, Samuel Jacks tracks a german spy to a robed suicide cult. There are various slapstick gags; Sam frightendly goes down a slide, the footage reverses, and he goes back up the slide. This occurs three times until he is hammered on the head. Sam's performance can be perceived as something "Not-So-Bad" by modern audiences. He seems a hairsbreadth from Keaton's detective or perhaps even the Stooges Three. In fact, reviewer Jessica Salmonson, also known as Paghat the Ratgirl situates the entire film as an homage to *Keystone Cops*, with Sam perceived as slightly brighter than his caucasian stooges (Ratgirl). However, she offers a unique contemporary perspective:

"Black audiences were able to compare Detective Sambo to the detective in John Edward Bruce's militantly race-proud *The Black Sleuth* (serialized in *McGirt's Magazine*, 1907-1909). John Edward Bruce was active in Black Masonry (such as is spoofed in *Spying the Spy*[sic]) & he was a Black Nationalist orator & author of considerable intellectuality. He even espoused armed self-defense & black militia activity at a time when whites lynched blacks without fear of the law, making him a precursor to the Black Panthers. Quite naturally lowbrow cinema did not live up to the model of John Edward Bruce's very politically motivated Yoruba American detective Sadipe. So audiences, encouraged by Chicago's black newspapers & ministers from their pulpits, assessed Sambo Sam [lead actor Samuel Jacks] still too much a minstrel show

caricature; or, churches critical of race-films generally, regarded them too apt to be morally corrupting, so that women & children in particular were warned away. Chicago's activism against Ebony Films meant it closed down in 1919, having produced only twenty-one short films." (Ratgirl).

This narrative implies that as forgiving as one might wish to be to Samuel Jacks' performance, studio decisions were *not* solely to blame for the demise of Ebony Studios. As early as 1918, audiences rejected portrayals as seemingly innocuous as those in *Spying the Spy*, for being demeaning and inadequate. Many worked against its screening as it existed in opposition to progressive and satisfying representations already available in the community. There is, perhaps, a solid argument that audiences were too discerning, too progressive, or too smart for this kind of thing.

Personally, I enjoyed *Spying the Spy*. I think it is hair-raising, abrupt, and provokes thought. I cannot imagine the movie *B.ofaNashit* in a course without it, although I'm also not sure it should be publicly screened. Certainly, this chapter of film history stresses racial caricatures in films of the 1920's, 1930's, 1940's, 1950's, 1960's, 1970's, 1980's 1990's, or early 2000's do not need to be seen as something normal, inevitable, or part of what must be swallowed to understand or appreciate art, culture, or society. One hundred years ago people saw these issues and immediately commanded their friends and neighbors: "Do not watch these movies, do not show these movies." Yet even one hundred years later, Americans still think it's too early to stop, which is a sobering perspective.

There's also a diversity of argument which stresses the inclusion of these elements. Those voices sometimes cite an imperative to not attempt to erase racism. Even researching what history has deemed "race films" can be a difficult task as a result. There's a real opportunity to forefront and commend these previous works of film history in conversation,

academia, and screenings. The removal of racist fixations from curriculum and culture isn't contributing to some kind of erasure; it's the unworking of a greater and grosser erasure which happened a century ago and is perpetuated today.

Let us forefront The Ebony Film Company's President Luther (pictured below) and their star comedy player, Samuel Jacks (pictured next page). These were two men who were doing the work, asking the questions, risking their names and fortunes in order to chart the frontiers of unknowing.



President Luther

Photographer unknown, L. J. Pollard: President, Ebony Film Corporation, from the 18 May 1918 edition of *Exhibitors Herald* (Chicago: Exhibitors Herald, 1918)



Samuel Jacks

Still image of Samuel Jacks pulled from the 1918 film *Spying the Spy*. As are most American films before 1928, this film is in the public domain.

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