



# OBSCURING THE BIGGER PICTURE

## Native Son

Directed by Jerrold Freedman

By Pat Aufderheide

IN 1938, RICHARD WRIGHT—A SELF-EDUCATED, Mississippi-born writer involved with the Communist Party—published a collection of short stories called *Uncle Tom's Children*. People wept with sorrow to read them.

Wright was appalled. "I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it," he wrote, "that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."

In 1940, Wright published *Native Son*. It's the story of Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old Chicago migrant from the South who accidentally kills the daughter of the wealthy family for whom he's the "relief job" chauffeur. He flees and, before he's captured, murders his girlfriend.

Bigger stands trial with the help of a Communist Party lawyer. "Listen," the lawyer tells the judge and jury. "What Bigger Thomas did...was but a tiny aspect of what he had been doing all his life long! He was living, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions that resulted

in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one's eyes. It was an act of creation!"

Sentenced to die, Bigger gets a glimmer of the lawyer's Marxist vision, and he probes this still-new notion of purpose in human action.

"I didn't want to kill!" Bigger shouted. "But what I killed for, I am!..."

"What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good!... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em...."

**Modern man:** Bigger was black, and not just black but black and bad. For Wright, he exemplified both the life force and the death force of the black community.

But Wright believed that Bigger wasn't just a creation of black America. He found in Bigger a soul dehumanized by an industrial system so much larger than the fabric of family or community, and so savage in its effects, that for many any role in building a better world (Wright's hope shining through the darkness of the novel) seems impossible. Wright could see fascism, as well as white racist movements, fueled by the inchoate anger of many Biggers.

Despite lit-criticisms of its agitprop con-

struction, its sociological speeches and its symbolic characters, the book speaks as loudly today as it did then. If anything, its meaning has gained urgency over time. Racial violence rocks New York and goes unpunished in a Southern military academy. Today the black youth unemployment rate is the highest in the country; black income is so low that two-thirds of the black population is eligible for welfare programs. While Claude Brown, author of the horrifying street-tale *Manchild in the Promised Land*, soberly warns *New York Times* readers that the nihilistic patterns he described two decades ago are now pandemic. The Ku Klux Klan, with a membership higher than that of the '40s, recruits new members in high schools and colleges.

In the '40s, Hollywood was tempted by *Native Son*, which Wright had written with a deliberately cinematic style. But Wright refused to sell the story to studios who wanted to make the central characters—yes—white. Argentines were more interested. Wright wound up playing Bigger for this South American version, which turned out to be a potboiler.

Hollywood, or the new financial configuration nostalgically referred to as "Hollywood," still isn't interested. But by 1986 an indepen-

dent producer, Diane Silver, managed to pull together some \$2 million to make a version—with the help of such stars as Oprah Winfrey, Geraldine Page, Matt Dillon and Elizabeth McGovern settling for far less than their usual fees. And so in 1987, the only American film version of *Native Son* has been released. People will weep with sorrow over what they see. Richard Wright would be appalled.

**Soft and shallow:** *Native Son*, the movie, is poignant, touching, tasteful. What it's not is hard or deep. The core of the novel—Bigger's access to freedom through killing, and what that means for survival and reform of a civilization populated by Biggers—is simply missing.

This film glows discreetly with organizational competence. Scriptwriter Richard Wesley (*Uptown Saturday Night*, *Let's Do It Again*, *Fast Forward*) has solid mainstream experience, as does director Jerrold Freedman, most of whose work has been in television. But their workmanlike construction has fatal flaws.

You've met Bigger, seen his face on streets, in alleys, on the subways—but not on this screen. Victor Love, the 29-year-old classically trained actor who debuts on film here, produces a moving portrait of someone, but not Bigger. This is a Bigger with an open face, someone who registers shock, remorse and doubt on the surface. Within the framework of this script, Bigger's fate lacks the inevitability that created its power in the novel.

If you aren't confronted with the horror of the partly-human in Bigger, neither are you forced to confront, without the consolation of tears, the episodes which illuminate that horror. Key scenes in the novel measure the distance between the reader's reactions and Bigger's. Among them are the disposal of the white girl's body, when Bigger can't fit her body into the furnace and must cut off her head; and his callous, resigned murder of his "girl" Bessie, who for him is nothing more than a convenient appliance of adulthood.

**Made-for-TV poetics:** In the movie, the decapitation was deleted. As Wesley explained to *Black Film Review*, "We just decided not to do that. About half the audience would get up and leave at that point. It was not the kind of thing we wanted to show on screen."

Also gone is the murder of Bessie (played by Akosua Busia). Diane Silver and PBS producer Lindsay Law, who helped finance the movie, agreed that the second murder might kill audience empathy. "We asked ourselves many times," said Law in the *New York Times*, "why is an audience going to want to attempt to understand this man if he goes this step further?" Of course, it's that "step further" that takes you out of made-for-TV poetics and into the mandate of Wright's novel.

But nothing shows the movie's fundamen-

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