



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Shaft

Renowned photojournalist Gordon Parks' second film as director boasts a fine performance by Richard Roundtree as private eye John Shaft, investigating the activities of a Harlem racketeer who hires him to find his kidnapped daughter. Ernest Tidyman's original story had a white protagonist: Parks' decision to cast an African American – along with Isaac Hayes' memorable music – made the film an influential success.

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Music can play strange tricks on your memory. Too many listenings to Isaac Hayes' outstanding main theme for the original movie *Shaft* had me convinced that from the first moment we clap eyes on actor Richard Roundtree's bushy moustache and chocolate leather greatcoat it was the unmistakable scratchy wah-wah guitar and hissing hi-hat that underscored his macho persona as investigator John Shaft.

Watching it again, it came as a shock that Roundtree walks to the beat of nothing but traffic noise for quite some time before Hayes' magic begins.

So what else establishes Roundtree's ineffable badass cool? The walk is purposeful but not quick, he is watchful rather than wary. He doesn't swivel his hips as Norman Mailer suggests hipsters do in his essay 'The White Negro', nor does he approximate the 'pimp roll' bestowed on young New York blacks by Tom Wolfe in his novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

He walks a little like he's acting too hard, but it doesn't matter. His signifiers are his pimp-slick leather coat filled out with muscle and his black roll-neck sweater that says Black Power but also James Bond (and maybe, just maybe, *rive gauche* Radical Chic – remember this was the era when Leonard Bernstein invited the Panthers to cocktails – which may explain why Shaft lives in Greenwich Village).

The other signifier of cool working for him is New York itself, and it was never more its cinematic self than in the bad old 70s, with old-style yellow cabs and phone boxes and the thin light of winter – in other words the New York of *Taxi Driver* and *The French Connection*. John Shaft has many James Bond trappings: a groovy 70s bachelor pad, a supply of compliant women and reliable buddies (including the Panthers) wherever and whenever he needs them, but he remains somehow wedded to the real streets of a real city. And just as he seems impervious to the machinations of sinister and sleazy white folks in the film, so his persona seems equally impervious to the hindsight that wants to reclaim all 70s artefacts as pleasurable kitsch.

Shaft doesn't have the greatest of storylines or the most convincing action effects and its dialogue is not as rich with street jive as, say, *Super Fly*, but it establishes the key hero of blaxploitation movies with verve, charm and a whiff of real danger. Shaft is the first black hero in the movies allowed to be inscrutably dangerous.

As the theme song's lyrics state, 'he's a complicated man,' and it's the sense that he could do anything as cold-bloodedly as Bond that made him so refreshing for black audiences in the 70s.

Nick James, *Sight & Sound*, August 2000

A contemporary review

Gordon Parks' first film – still unreleased in this country – was *The Learning Tree* (1968), a problem story about a young negro growing up in America in the Twenties and coming to terms with the reality of racial prejudice. His new film, *Shaft*, which has been making more money in the States than *Ryan's Daughter*, is a fast, slick private eye thriller which, Parks assures us, has no didactic pretensions: 'It's just a Saturday night fun picture which people go to see because they want to see the black guy winning'. But if *Shaft* is not an explicit 'message' film, it's by no means a sell-out to Hollywood either.

Like Ossie Davis' *Cotton Comes to Harlem* it transposes a traditionally white genre, the New York private eye thriller, into an all-negro context, and in the process avoids the possibility of isolating the negro in the cliché roles of picturesque minor character or Poitier-style social martyr or (newest refinement from *Night of the Living Dead*) the black-no-one-notices-is-any-different. There may indeed be no essential difference between the two races, but differences have been imposed from outside, through political or social tyranny; and Parks' one explicit nod to the racial problem is to have his damsel-in-distress rescued by a band of black militants. But in other respects, *Shaft* conforms to the straightforward tradition of the gangster thriller.

Though it's less mercurial and less funny than *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Parks has a more efficient way with narrative than Davis (the militants' strategic infiltration of the hotel, one division working up from the kitchens, the other down from the roof, is a superbly organised climactic sequence), and he gets uniformly excellent, edgy performances from his cast (the cynical-affectionate relationship between Shaft and the white police officer is especially well done). Although streamlining sometimes gets the better of simplicity, notably in the script's relentlessly supercool dialogue, all throwaway colloquialisms and 'tough' Chandlerian wisecracks, *Shaft* is in the main a highly workmanlike and enjoyable thriller.

Nigel Andrews, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1972

SHAFT

Directed by: Gordon Parks
@: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer *presents a*
Stirling Silliphant Roger Lewis *production*
a Shaft Productions Ltd. *picture*
Produced by: Joel Freeman
Associate Producer: David Golden
Unit Production Manager: Steven Skloot
Assistant Director: Ted Zachary
CASTING: Judith Lamb
Screenplay by: Ernest Tidyman, John D.F. Black
Based upon the novel by: Ernest Tidyman
Director of Photography: Urs Furrer
Film Editor: Hugh A. Robertson
Art Director: Emanuel Gerard
Set Decoration: Robert Drumheller
Costume Designer: Joe Aulisi
Make-up: Martin Bell
Music by: Isaac Hayes
Rhythm by: The Bar Kays
Technical Assistant to Composer: Tom McIntosh
Sound: Lee Bost, Hal Watkins

Cast

Richard Roundtree (*John Shaft*)
Moses Gunn (*Bumpy Jonas*)
Charles Cioffi (*Lt Vic Androzzi*)
Christopher St. John (*Ben Buford*)
Gwenn Mitchell (*Ellie Moore*)
Lawrence Pressman (*Tom Hannon*)
Victor Arnold (*Charlie*)
Sherri Brewer (*Marcy*)
Rex Robbins (*Rollie*)
Camille Yarbrough (*Dina Greene*)
Margaret Warncke (*Linda*)
Joseph Leon (*Byron Leibowitz*)
Arnold Johnson (*Cul*)

Dominic Barto (*Patsy*)
George Strus (*Carmen*)
Edmund Hashim (*Lee*)
Drew Bundini Brown (*Willy*)
Tommy Lane (*Leroy*)
Al Kirk (*Sims*)
Shimen Ruskin (*Dr Sam*)
Antonio Fargas (*Bunky*)
Gertrude Jeannette (*old lady*)
Lee Steele (*blind vendor*)
Damu King (*Mal*)
Donny Burks (*Remmy*)
Tony King (*Davies*)
Benjamin R. Rixson (*Bey Newfield*)
Ricardo Brown (*Tully*)
Alan Weeks (*Gus*)
Glenn Johnson (*Char*)
Dennis Tate (*Dotts*)
Adam Wade (*1st brother*)
James Hainesworth (*2nd brother*)
Clee Burtonya (*Sonny*)
Ed Bernard (*Peerce*)
Ed Barth (*Tony*)
Joe Pronto (*Dom*)
Robin Nolan (*waitress*)
Ron Tannas (*Billy*)
Betty Bresler (*Mrs Androzzi*)
Gonzalo Madurga (*counterman*)
Paul Nevens (*elevator man*)
Jon Richards (*elevator starter*)
Gordon Parks (*man with pipe*)*

USA 1971©

100 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Shaft

Fri 12 Nov 20:50; Tue 23 Nov 18:20

Heat

Sat 13 Nov 16:30; Mon 15 Nov 13:40

Blue Velvet

Sat 13 Nov 20:45; Sun 21 Nov 17:40

Dirty Harry

Sun 14 Nov 18:20; Fri 26 Nov 20:45

House of Bamboo

Mon 15 Nov 18:10

Murder on the Orient Express

Tue 16 Nov 14:15

Devil in a Blue Dress

Wed 17 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by *Empire Magazine*

Contributing Editor Amon Warmann)

The Silence of the Lambs

Thu 18 Nov 14:40

Illustrious Corpses (Cadaveri eccellenti)

Fri 19 Nov 20:40; Sat 27 Nov 18:10

Kiss Me Deadly

Sat 20 Nov 18:00; Sat 28 Nov 12:15

Chinatown

Sat 20 Nov 20:30

The Manchurian Candidate

Sun 21 Nov 14:50

Un Flic

Tue 23 Nov 20:45; Mon 29 Nov 20:55

No Country for Old Men

Wed 24 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

Inside Man

Thu 25 Nov 14:30; Tue 30 Nov 20:20

The Long Goodbye

Sat 27 Nov 20:40

Zero Dark Thirty

Sun 28 Nov 15:20

In the Cut

Tue 30 Nov 18:10

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