



Library podcast

Evening the Score: Renee C. Baker

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[00:00:37] I know some of you for other people. I might be newer to you. Good evening. My name is C. Davida Ingram and the public engagement programs manager. I always like the way we start programs at the library in the evening because it's really designed for us to build community together. So thank you for taking a moment to meet your neighbor. We often encourage people to meet their neighbor and do their gender pronouns and that's to make this space very inclusive and as Orlando said use the restroom that best suits your gender identity. If you need support with getting in the restroom let us know we're always here to help. Tonight's program is entitled evening the score with Renee S. Baker. And before I move for it I just want to acknowledge that we are on Duwamish land throughout 2018 we're looking forward to doing many programs that celebrate native let talent artistry and culture for both Coast Salish and urban Indian peoples in Seattle so please stay tuned for the programming we're doing and our community partners Seattle Art Museum is doing their opening tonight for double exposure so we also encourage you to check out that programming as well. Our programs here and public engagement are made possible with support from the Seattle Public Library Foundation.

[00:01:53] Do we happen to have any donors or supporters in the audience tonight. Can we give them a round of applause.

[00:02:02] We appreciate you and your support means that we can bring people like Renee S. Baker into our library to celebrate her for her artistry. We are about to get ready to show the film but I want to say before we show the film please stick around because after we listened to Renee see Baker's original score for Oscar me shows body and soul. You get to meet the artist and we will have probably about 10 or 15 minute Kewanee so please please stay after we showed the film and before we show the film I just wanted to read Renee's bio.

[00:02:40] So Renee is a composer. She scores for Chicago Modern Orchestra Project and she's a music director and conductor of the internationally acclaimed Chicago Modern Orchestra Project. She has composed more than 2000 works. I said 2000 which is huge for ensembles including commissioned pieces for The Chicago Symphony in the Chicago Symphony Chamber Ensemble

Berlin International Brass Joffrey Ballet chamber series dancer Wright Project San Francisco and many others in composing for silent film. Renee has created cutting edge original them for a second at a keep my notes together. Original scores for more than 100 films and performed her work at Live screening events film festivals with orchestras and ensembles across the globe. Baker's film score recordings include Body and Soul which you'll see tonight but also Broken Blossoms. Women of R'lyeh Rayas and orphan Birth Of A Nation a natural born gambler and the Bluebird to name a few. Her own experimental forays the film we just watched was one of her experimental pieces called dinner. Our forays into surreal surrealistic filmmaking and have resulted in thirty one hour films entitled outre extreme Meia art film Cinema series currently being screened in Seattle and around the country and abroad an alternative cinema locations. Second we give a warm round of applause for Rene

[00:04:21] It's always exciting to have national artists come to Seattle and after we watch the film we will get to chat with Rene.

[00:04:44] Did you like it. Don't like say no. I had a lot of fun doing it. It's so amazing. I think

[00:04:55] It's still not on there. Now it's on HBO. Awesome. So Renee when we were getting ready for the program one of the things that I know is that I'm in the hands of a very seasoned artist who meets audiences all around the country. But if you just for the sake of the folks who might be listening on the podcast later could you give us a sense of the film we just watched because it was pretty magisterial so if you just give us a little sense of what body and soul is and why you scored it.

[00:05:25] We just watched Body and Soul 1925 written and directed by Oscar Micheaux.

[00:05:32] This was I can't remember exactly in the scheme of his movies but they were there were really only about three remaining silent films from about 45 films that he made body and soul is one of the best preserved and it's it's the first role of Paul Robeson in the film. And so ask him show was was a very instrumental in developing the race film the films for black audiences and this was one that because he was the original DIY dude.

[00:06:19] You know where he road to going around screen wrote it produced it.

[00:06:26] He didn't have a lot of money. So often the archival The way he saves things wasn't good. So so many of the films just either the lost or there they are in poor enough condition that a lot of them couldn't be preserved. This movie originally was nine reels this was five that you saw.

[00:06:53] That's what was preserved of it. So if you noticed toward the end of the movie there was a card that said Part 8. I didn't take it out on purpose because I think not only is it his art but it's already been chopped up enough by sense boards or whatever so I decided to leave it in. But it is a really good glimpse sometimes comical but pretty truthful of what life was like for the African American here in America in 1925.

[00:07:26] That's fantastic. And for our audience one cool thing is that we have that theater till just before 8 Thirties and in a moment we're going to pass the mikes to you so if you have questions are there folks have questions for Rene can you raise your hand if you have questions. So there are folks who have questions. I'm going to ask two more and then we're going to open it up. So just for a frame framework it was really this was my first time watching body and soul. And it's interesting because on one level it's been such a big year for black film. If you think of a wrinkle in time with Ava DuVernay with black directors in particular and then if you also think of even something like Black Panther just the way black imagination is kind of shifting around and so being able to go back to Oscar Micheaux and extend that line is important but just this past week in the library we had a program that was inspired by the movement about me too. So I think that moment in the film where we're looking at the politics around gender and race and sexual assault even if it changes at the end. That was very interesting. What were some of the things that stood out for you from scoring this film because there were many different things that happened and the types of music that you made.

[00:08:42] One thing that I that I don't do when I'm looking at the film is you know if I spend all my time looking at the political ramifications of everything man I'd never get the music done. So yeah me too.

[00:08:56] You too. You too. You too. Whatever. I loved the movie and I was trying to honor the art of Oscar Micheaux in scoring this one. So I I had a lot of fun with the music. It took me about a year to finish because not being a real film composer at that time.

[00:09:25] I had to think through what it what it was I was going to do and how I wanted to approach it. So I knew that my approach was going to be kind of abstract.

[00:09:34] I knew it was going to have a creative music influence some jazz and some a lot of dissonance.

[00:09:43] But because I'm not a trained maker I was aware of the method of Mickey Mouse thing action and I decided not to do that because if if something's happening you can see it. Intelligent people watch silent film so you don't really need me to tell you what you just saw.

[00:10:05] I discord to actually act as another character because I didn't have to fight with dialogue so I could make it I could score the way I wanted to score it. But Body and Soul was merely an entree to us scoring. Because I did not want to get pegged just as a black composer. I just wanted to be a film composer so I quickly left the show and went to Japanese film and then went to world cinema. But then I made a full circle and came back and scored the remaining two silent films of Oscar Micheaux which are within our gates and symbol of the Unconquered both of which are movies a deal heavily with the theme of the KKK.

[00:10:57] So they were kind of answers to D.W. Griffith's Birth of a nation and trying to show that we really weren't all clowns as we were depicted in Birth of a nation. But I have to admit I don't throw anything.

[00:11:14] I have rescored Birth of a nation and I had a great time doing it. It's history and I think it needed to be put in a modern context. So I just thought I'd drop dead little bomb.

[00:11:28] What do you think about.

[00:11:30] Well there's a part of me that maybe you just personally I would I don't want to push back but I'm just thinking about the way when we look at the news and we look at the recent marches in Charlottesville and when you say it's in the past it doesn't feel like it's very much in the past. So when you were scoring the film what are some ways that you would connect the past with the present.

[00:11:50] It's connected to the present because I'm living. If you guys paid attention in the parts that you saw in the first film you saw the Charlottesville

[00:12:02] Prote you saw a lot of stuff.

[00:12:04] So I don't avoid I don't avoid it. When I'm crafting my own work however when I'm crafting a score for someone else's work. Dead or alive I'm I'm not trying to bring socio political economic sense to it because I don't see that as my job as a composer. Also I am not a headline chaser so I'm not that I dishonor anything anybody does but I don't need the headlines to create. So if if a riot happened here I'm probably not going to write a piece about it the next week. I'm probably not going to write a piece about it that year because other people will jump.

[00:12:50] I call them composing ambulance chasers. They someone else will do it. So I have my mission is different and it's a personal one. So I won't always pushback when people want to politicize what it is that I do because of political. If you see it as Politico then see it as political that's you. I

[00:13:14] Choose to see what I do as art and let people pull the meanings from it that they want. Yeah that's where I am.

[00:13:25] Before we open it up to the audience just kind of set the stage for us. What led you to your love of music and also what are some of the things that made you move towards composing culture.

[00:13:40] Well I've been playing since I was a child first grade violin and viola played in orchestras. I am dyed in the wool classical. That's that about 10 years ago though. I took a step onto the dark side and joined the ACM. Can you see what AC means. Yes so station for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. So I'm a black creative music collective started in 1965 so I that's when I and Ernest started looking at composition because I needed to learn the language that the ACM was using.

[00:14:23] I needed to be able to access it for me.

[00:14:25] So the easiest way for me to do that was to write and to compose and then you know I started my own projects because I didn't want to wait to hear my music from the other side. At the

groups I'm not interested in posthumous awards so I decided that I would form my own orchestra for my own ensembles.

[00:14:52] And then I decided even though I had worked at colleges and things for many years I went back to school for music composition because I wanted to fill in some holes in my knowledge and Body and Soul was a project that wasn't brought to me from the film area. Even though I was in the contemporary classical arena so that was the start of the journey so you actually saw my absolute first attempt at film scoring which the press liked. So I ran with it and decided to work on their silent film so to this point with my ensemble now we've scored over 200 silent films in the last three years.

[00:15:41] And so it's been a great journey.

[00:15:46] We're going to open up the floor for questions. We're going to get Mike's out to the audience please please please use the mike even if you're like me. I have a really loud voice but for the podcast we want to make sure everyone can hear.

[00:15:58] I think we quest and off to the side Errani so can I ask two questions. The first one is what what are the source for these films like where do they come from or are you getting like preserved things from archives. Where did they come from.

[00:16:20] Yeah some of them come from archives. This one we got from the library of Congress and there were two versions available. One that was an hour 26 minutes or something. 119 126 and 145 and so this is the one that I got and I decided not to look at the other ones but I work very closely with the black

[00:16:46] Film Center archives at Indiana University. They've proven to be an absolutely invaluable resource. So I've made numerous visits there and I leave with piles of things on their desks that they have to duplicate and get to me.

[00:17:02] I do. I work with a lot of film producers who sourced their things directly from other archives in the Library of Congress so yeah.

[00:17:14] Question number two then is more about your music. I know that you work in a lot of different modes you work with through composed music and improvisation within a sort of structured context and graphic scores and conducted improvisation and I'm curious how any or all of those things may have been at play in this work do you. Is it a little bit of all of them or are you kind of focusing on one or two areas like that in scoring this one.

[00:17:44] Because I didn't know anything about scoring I did it the way they told me which was a deal with the timeframe in and recording cues and the reason why I took a year. I mean I can't think of anything that I've ever taken a year to do other than you know form a baby what. I mean. I mean but I had to learn to process properly. So you know it happened in five and ten minute increments writing The Arcs writing it recording it and then sending it to the producer like like everybody else does.

[00:18:19] I got kickbacks sometimes and other times they said oh brilliant.

[00:18:23] Other times he said wow this doesn't quite set but because I wasn't doing what I thought was going to turn into a commercial project. I kick back just as hard because I wanted my vision whatever my vision was flawed or otherwise on the movie. So there were many many instances where we had disagreements like those church scenes. I got major kick back about that because the first request was honestly said could you what do you think about Holy Holy Holy. I said What about it.

[00:18:58] Like when and I said do we miss something. He's a Jacklyn preacher. He's a con man.

[00:19:06] So we're not going to use anything sacred so but we wanted something that had singing or a voice or whatever. So we came up with the scat. So that's actually a trumpet player in my orchestra.

[00:19:24] So the if you heard it you heard strange you heard the orchestra you heard voices you heard electronics but it's a large ensemble. So depending on what I needed for that particular timeframe that's what we recorded. It didn't take long to record but that that that putting it in process. We actually did it on Skype and my producers in New York. I was in Illinois. So every couple of weeks we would take like a two or three hour time to to move that thing back and forth and put it in. So my you know my concept process is always a combination of absolutely traditional notation graphic painted conducted conceptualize.

[00:20:15] I mean it's it's I use all of those concepts all the time.

[00:20:21] And especially if I'm using my musicians if I'm going somewhere and they're musicians at that read what they don't improvise or anything then that's another thing that I have to bring all through composed great questions.

[00:20:37] Next question was completely amazing.

[00:20:43] Thank you for bringing that to us.

[00:20:46] Renee I'm going to ask you to do something I really can't hear what's coming out of these mines. So little bit louder if you can. OK. Can you hear me now. Yeah.

[00:20:58] Take it down a little bit about the fact that that's better for me. OK great. Thank you. That was riveting and completely amazing.

[00:21:08] And I mean I just like my heart was in my mouth like Wow I just say it louder say it louder.

[00:21:16] It's great. And I just I just am stunned that this is your first work scoring a film. It's just blows me away.

[00:21:31] Girl I'm good. Yes you are. And I just have.

[00:21:35] I mean this is just kind of a small process oriented question to you. When you were leading your orchestra in the recording sessions did you watch the video at the time when you were recording that bit.

[00:21:54] Oh yeah. Each bit yeah.

[00:21:59] It's very different when you've been a. I've been a musician in pits and recording like forever. But when you're the one who has to try to fit action to something I had to make a decided

[00:22:12] I hadn't made a decision that I was going to be able to hit every mark. So every time somebody did something I wasn't going to be able to give up to that. So I stopped trying I can tell you the one thing that was hardest for me to score was a stupid scene with him in that closet with those two brooms that fell

[00:22:39] Because I didn't want to do it.

[00:22:42] And then the producer came back and said those two Broom's I said yeah I Sorman you song. So they'll sing them. But you said no no we we need sound. I said all right I'll give you I'll give you that one. But in general I tried to match what was happening in people's heads. Do you remember the scene when they were in the buggy and the storm was happening. That was my favorite electronic scene. And they hated that they kept saying electronics do not belong.

[00:23:20] I said well no one cares what year it is we're just talking about a sound. And I thought that that scream that the anxiety in her face and voice and things that fit perfectly. Now there's maybe a hundred other ways one can do it but that's the way I want to do it.

[00:23:38] So just one more little thing speaking of the screen there is this the scene when the mother goes out to get food and Isabel is left by herself with this fake preacher.

[00:23:53] And there's a kind of a screaming tone that it's not like seems like an electronic screamy thing.

[00:24:02] What was that there are electronics all through this.

[00:24:07] When we as a non electronics kind of musician we do have a tendency to think of electronic music often there's only one kind of thing. Those of us that don't do it. OK. So I like to use electronics as another instrument not always as an interruption not always as something just surprise but something that can really help shape and craft the sonic landscape and can often sometimes I get tired of trying to get those sounds out of instruments when I know I can't get it if I just get to the right electronics artist. So I did. They were truly convinced though that electronics wouldn't work.

[00:24:56] But I want we have about 10 minutes before we have to close the auditorium down so let's do one more question more questions before we let you mingle with Renee for a little bit. No more questions if I will ask you to do that just closing thoughts for any closing thoughts. Things that she probably like to share insights that maybe we haven't got to. For me silent cell was was just something that

[00:25:29] You know you watched on Saturdays you know on television. But discovering body and soul and discovering the hundreds of other kind of unsung silent silent films so many of the silent films were only seen a few times because that was some of the only entertainment so people just cranked them out.

[00:25:55] They cranked them out every month. Some of them weren't very good but many of them aren't around because they weren't preserved well. So I think for me it was just a ready resource. I have a palette that's pretty huge and silent film really allows me to exercise. All of those

[00:26:21] All the techniques you know so I do it for the love of it. I'm just happy I'm just happy that I've been lucky to get screenings to do film festivals to have museums called to have galleries ask.

[00:26:40] It's it's really been amazing. And in July of this year it will be three years that I've been on the silent film Journey.

[00:26:51] So I've had a great time doing amazing work.

[00:26:56] I was telling Renee before the audience showed up I was messaging with the curators for the Langston Hughes African-American Film Festival and they were so excited that she brought the film and they asked Do you think she might be interested in coming back to Seattle so I hope you think about that. And I'm so very delighted to have met you. So thank you. Thank you. You're welcome. All right. We will wrap it up.

[00:27:24] This podcast was presented by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.