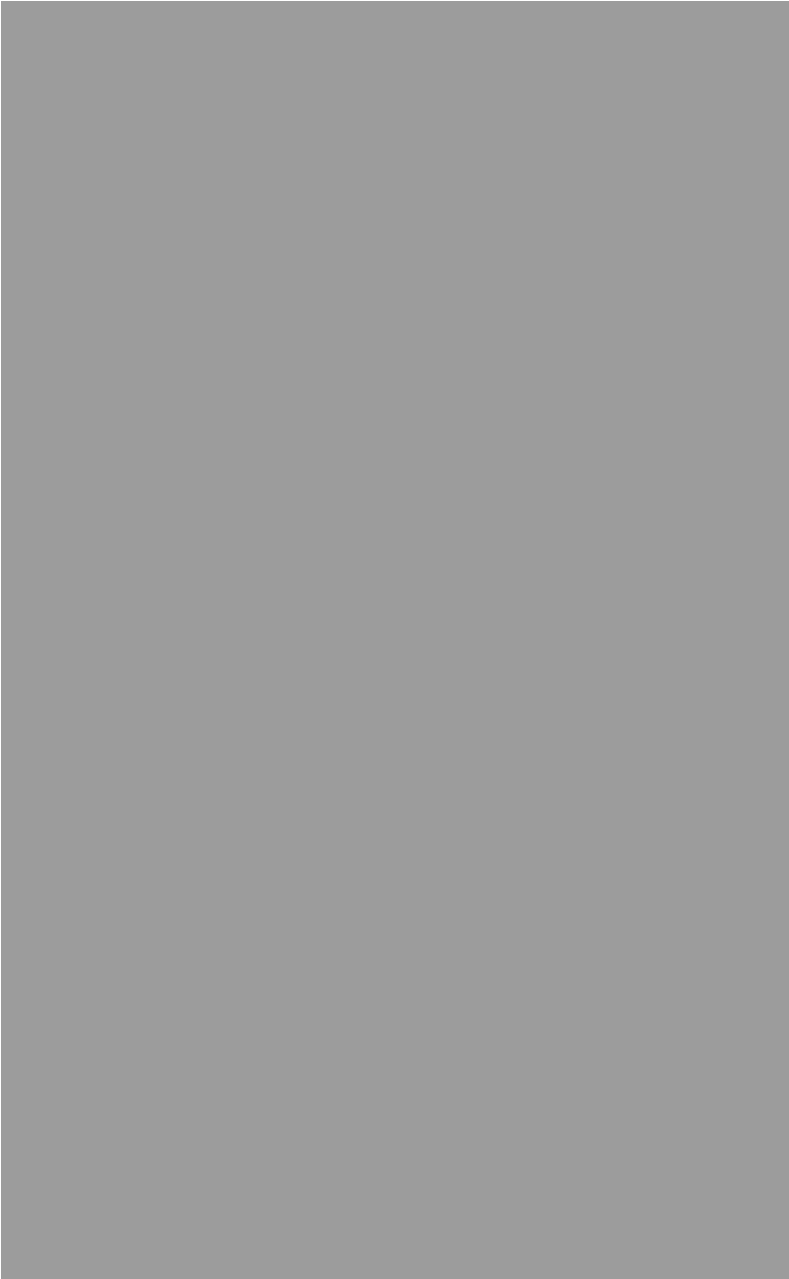




FROM THE OUTSIDE
LOOKING IN

The Films of Winston Washington Moxam

by Matthew Rankin



Winston Washington Moxam is something of a lone wolf in the annals of Winnipeg cinema. He is a maverick in a city of weirdoes. He makes politically engaged dramatic films concerned with social justice and interracial understanding that are both deeply personal and defiantly, resiliently independent. And he's done it all on the periphery of a peripheral city.

By any standard, Winston Moxam ranks among the most prolific and original cinematic voices in Manitoba. In less than five years in the mid-1990s, Moxam wrote, directed and produced no fewer than eight dramatic shorts—two of which, *The Barbeque* (1993) and *The Welfare King* (1996) were over 30 minutes in length—before making the leap into feature filmmaking with *Barbara James* (2001), *Billy* (2009) and the forthcoming *When I Grow Too Old To Dream*. He has done all of this without budgets, without media spectacle, without the collaborative support of an aesthetic circle and has managed to work largely outside of the financing infrastructure through which most Canadian feature films are funded. In his own words, Moxam's perspective is that of a filmmaker on the outside looking in, and that is true not only of his career but of the ideas that have compelled his body of work.

Winston Washington Moxam was born in England in 1963, the son of Jamaican immigrants. His family moved to Canada in 1971, after a 3-year detour back in Jamaica, and settled into a home on Cathedral Avenue in Winnipeg's North End. Winnipeg's black community has always been relatively small, particularly in the early 1970s. At what point did Moxam first discover that he was a now a "visible minority" in his adoptive homeland? When did he become conscious of racism? "As soon as I got off the plane," he answers. As a boy at Luxton Elementary School, Moxam quickly came face to face with racial alienation, an experience that would later become one of the central creative preoccupations of his filmmaking.

After finishing a degree in anthropology at the University of Winnipeg in 1986, Moxam studied film production at



Confederation College in Thunder Bay, Ontario—an unlikely but no less important training mecca for a generation of Winnipeg filmmakers, including Jeff Erbach. Upon graduation in 1989, Moxam did as most Anglo-Canadian filmmakers inevitably do—he moved to Toronto.

But this move from the margins to the centre did not sit well with the young filmmaker. Moxam soon found the Toronto film world to be superficial. He felt little artistic kinship with an industry structured around shoulder-padded soap operas like *Street Legal* and the relentless, Sarah-Polley-enflamed Green-Gablegasms of Kevin Sullivan Entertainment. And so Moxam returned to what he understood and what he identified with: the periphery. Working variously as an editor,



synch-rusher, actor, security guard and, briefly, as a stand-in for Mr. T, Moxam directed the self-financed *From the Other Side*, a sensitive, 30 minute, black and white documentary portrait of homeless people living on the streets of Toronto.

The release print for *From the Other Side* was scarcely back from the lab when the Canada Council for the Arts approved funding for Moxam's satirical critique of Canadian multiculturalism *The Barbeque*, which was set in Winnipeg's North End. Money in hand, Moxam resolved to move his career back to his hometown, and hopped on a bus to Winnipeg. Within a few short hours of arriving, he went to the Artspace building and took out his first membership at the Winnipeg Film Group.

The isolated, windswept city of Winnipeg, festering eternally on the margins of mainstream Anglo-America, would seem to be a more appropriate cultural centre for a filmmaker who wanted to speak from the outside. Yet throughout the 1990s, Moxam would build a cinematic voice that defined itself against the reigning Winnipeg vanguard.

Filmmaking at the Winnipeg Film Group has typically been compelled by weirdness, formalist innovation and the surreal, and this was particularly true in the 1990s. In 2002, the Winnipeg Film Group produced a commemorative DVD entitled *The Sensationalists of the 90s*. The disc was something of a critical survey of the broad cinematic tendencies of Film Group members in the last decade of the 20th century. It included Jeff Erbach's transgressive re-imagining of W.O. Mitchell, *Soft Like Me*, in which Prairie farm boys are ritualistically enslaved by cannibalistic, grain-farming pederasts. The disc also included *Rapture*, a short film by Erbach's erstwhile production designer Gord Wilding, which is about a lecherous proto-NAMBLA shlub who uses his own dung to build a nude statue of the kid he has been stalking. The curation makes the point convincingly: In the 1990s, Winnipeg's indie filmmakers were largely compelled by sensationalism—the desire to shock and disturb and transgress.

Such was the tenor of Winnipeg filmmaking when Moxam returned to his hometown in 1992. Yet nothing could be farther from Moxam's film universe. In the Empire of Oddities that is the Winnipeg Film Group, Moxam's voice strikes a resolutely original chord, for his creative goals share virtually nothing with the abstracted mainstream of his contemporaries. "I wanted to make films for people," says Moxam, "films that deal with real issues of social injustice that people face every day. This is how I see myself. This is how I see life." In this, Moxam has been a truly independent solo artist with little back-up band.

Barbara James, 2001.



Moxam's films are big-hearted. They have a social conscience and a sincere concern for human dignity. *The Barbeque* is an intricate deconstruction of the passive-aggressive forms of racism that a young black woman has to face at her white boyfriend's family gathering. *The Welfare King* follows two kids through the frozen decrepitude of downtown Winnipeg and into the soulless, Filmon-era opulence of Linden Woods on a hopeful odyssey against child poverty. Moxam's first historical film, *Sand* (1999), chronicles the existential struggle of two African-Canadian soldiers in the Second World War as they contemplate the irony of defending a country that denigrates their humanity. And with his first feature, *Barbara James*, Moxam studies with tenderness and humour the dramatic situation of a young black woman (Storma T. McDonald) who finds herself pregnant and adrift in the world after a misguided, one-time encounter with an exploitative car salesman (Ross McMillan).



Moxam's characters are not pushovers. They are not helpless victims. They are resilient in the face of adversity and hold their own before a world that seeks to isolate them. Though they find themselves on the margins of their societies, they reveal resilience and conviction as they confront the injustices that have been dealt to them.

Questions of race have rarely been tackled by Winnipeg filmmakers. Throughout the sensationalist 1990s, Moxam was the lone cinematic voice to speak for racial understanding in Manitoba. In this respect, Moxam must be seen as a pioneer. Only very recently has he been joined by a younger generation of filmmakers—notably Divya Mehra and Darryl Nepinak—who, like Moxam before them, ask provocative questions of mainstream white audiences. Moxam's films bring welcome nuance to our understanding of race relations in Canada. They compel us to think about what it is like to be black in a place like Winnipeg. What is the experience of African-Canadians in Manitoba?

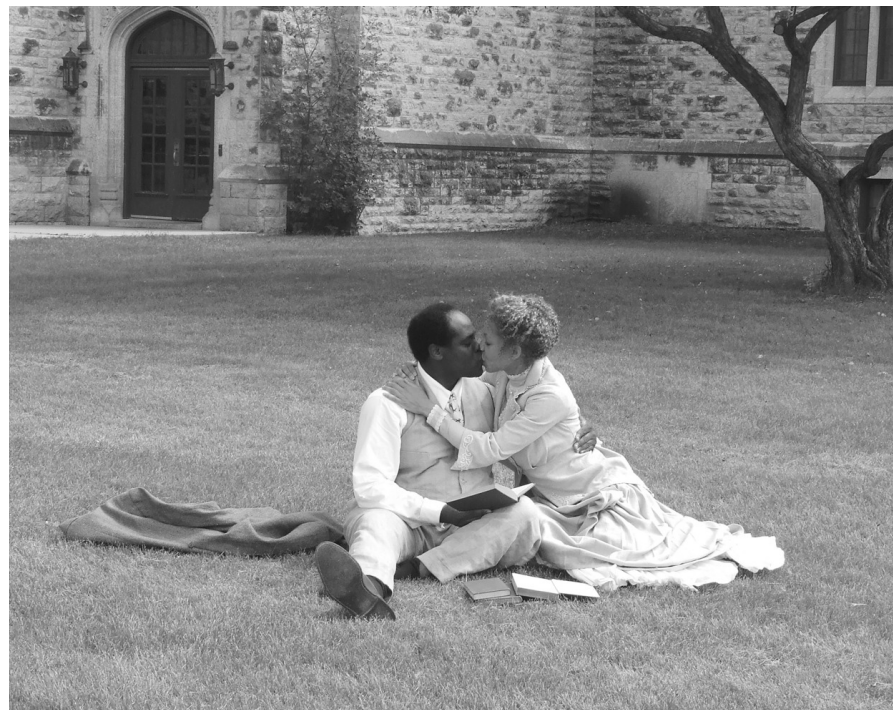
The average white-bread Canadian would prefer to believe that racism does not exist in this country. Equipped with a simplistic, blind faith in the untarnished perfection of Canada's multicultural mosaic as opposed to the slavery and race riots of the American melting pot, Joe WhiteGuy prefers to get back to the more comfortable business of eating mayonnaise and being complacent. Moxam's films jostle us out of our complacency; they refuse to reassure us with established truths. His films testify that racism does happen here. They dramatize how it has occurred in our history and how it occurs still today.

Moxam's forthcoming feature, *Billy*, promises to be the crowning artistic achievement of the director's career to date. The film stars one of Winnipeg's most captivating actors, Ernesto Griffith, who also co-wrote and is co-producing *Billy* with Moxam. The film is based on the true life story of Billy Beale (Griffith), a lone African-American photographer who



moves to Northern Manitoba in 1907. There, Beale encounters the comradeship as well as the bigoted violence of the other settlers as he embarks on a passionate romance with a white woman (Sarah Constible). Shot in glorious 35 mm by Claude Savard, this sensitive portrait of one man's search for acceptance in the earliest days of Manitoba history also promises to be a major contribution to our collective understanding of the African-Canadian experience, standing amid the metatexts of Clement Virgo and George Elliott Clarke. It also represents a dramatic coming together of the disparate threads of Moxam's career, not only in terms of theme and dramatic preoccupation, but also in terms of Moxam's stridently independent approach to film production.

Werner Herzog has said that it is not money that makes films; it is faith and the strength of your convictions alone that result in film. You just have to go out and do it, regardless of your means. In Winnipeg, there is perhaps no filmmaker who better exemplifies this Herzogian maxim than Winston Washington Moxam.



Top Left: *Sand*, 1999. Right: *Billy*, 2009.



The hardships of getting a film made can quickly drag a human soul into the most of destitute sub-strata of existential discouragement. The WFG film archive is littered with the sad ephemera left behind by the many “Three Year Filmmakers” who passed through its doors—those well-intentioned idealists who pursued filmmaking just as long as their self-confidence could endure its many disappointments, and then gave up. Even the most well-monied of directors must possess iron willpower and resilient emotional strength to see a film through to completion, and Moxam has made his films with unbelievably tiny budgets.

Denied funding from Canada’s feature film financing agencies, Moxam’s first feature, *Barbara James*, was produced for the minuscule sum of \$11,000 from the Manitoba Arts Council. Despite his severely limited means, Moxam defied all

conventional wisdom and expectation by shooting the film on 35 mm. Collecting 35 mm short ends from production houses throughout the city and recruiting a volunteer crew, Moxam shot *Barbara James* piecemeal over the course of 1998 and 1999. The unprocessed film stock lay dormant in his freezer for over a year before he could raise enough money to send it to the lab. It was not until André Bennett, the executive producer of Guy Maddin’s *Archangel* (1990) and *Careful* (1992) took an interest in distributing *Barbara James* that Telefilm opened its gates and helped Moxam release the picture. The making of *Barbara James* is a truly heroic feat of independent film production in Manitoba. And Moxam and collaborator Ernesto Griffith would do it again a few years later with *Billy*.

Billy enjoyed a marginally larger budget than *Barbara James*, but, as a period piece which takes place in both 1907 and 1967,

the film was radically more ambitious. With a modest Canada Council grant alone, Moxam and Griffith once again defied convention and shot the film on 35 mm. Using short-ends, they shot for 21 days straight in remote locations throughout southern Manitoba. Their shooting days chanced to fall within the massive heat wave of 2007, and temperatures smouldered hellishly above 45 degrees Celsius on every day of the shoot. Eight days into the filming, Moxam's director of photography suddenly abandoned the project in favour of a well-paid TV movie gig and had to be replaced by his camera assistant. The production was further cursed by rancid catering, \$800 in speeding tickets accrued during an emergency commute between locations, and a rental truck that was demolished when a production assistant drove it into a tree. And once more, the undeveloped film lay dormant in Moxam's freezer as the director patiently awaited post-production funds.

As he finishes *Billy*, Moxam is ready to pounce with another ambitious historical drama, *When I Grow Too Old To Dream*. This project has been waiting in the wings for its chance since 1989, a testimony to the incredible strength of the director's creative fire. Winston Washington Moxam remains a lone wolf in Winnipeg feature filmmaking. This position has been advantageous to the development of his singular perspective on the Winnipeg cinematic landscape, but it has also demanded enormous energy, conviction, and patience from the director. This is what the maverick filmmaker is willing to do in order to create new images. And this is what he must do to make his films from the outside looking in.

SELECTED INDEPENDENT FILMOGRAPHY

Billy | 2009 | 85:00

Barbara James | 2001 | 80:00

Sand | 1999 | 19:00

The Three Pilgrims | 1998 | 25:00

The Welfare King | 1996 | 40:00

The Woman in Black | 1996 | 11:00

The Pendulum | 1996 | 9:00

Suntan 20 20 | 1995 | 8:00

Fall | 1995 | 16:00

The Barbeque | 1993 | 48:00

From the Other Side | 1992 | 30:00

Grey on this Side, Black on the Other | 1990 | 9:00

Candice's Waltz | 1989 | 13:00