



News Release

BAMcinématek presents *The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn*, a tribute to the film work of the African American screenwriter and director, April 1-4

Film programmer, historian and friend of Gunn, Pearl Bowser, introduces *Ganja & Hess* on April 2

Brooklyn, March 15, 2010—From April 1-4, BAMcinématek presents *The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn*, honoring the film work of the African American actor, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and filmmaker. A boundless and original artist, Gunn's narrative and formal innovations are evident in every type of work he produced. A groundbreaker not only for being one of the first African American directors to have a film produced by a major studio, but the daring, one-of-a-kind film he wrote and directed, *Stop*. This foray into Hollywood filmmaking is chronicled in his book [Rhinestone Sharecropping](#). His vampire cult classic *Ganja & Hess* (the only American film presented during Critic's Week at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival), and his collaboration with poet/essayist Ishmael Reed on the video work *Personal Problems*, stretched this pioneer even further.

His premature death in 1989 at age 59—on the eve of the opening of his play *The Forbidden City*—denied audiences what would have been more years of extraordinary work. In his [New York Times](#) obituary, producer Joseph Papp said that Gunn was “one of the great black writers. He understood the kind of psychological relationships of black to whites more than anybody.” His friend Ishmael Reed, in a tribute he organized in 1990, wrote that Gunn's life was “the heroic story of an exquisite writer maintaining a quiet and elegant stoicism while being battered by the crass forces of bottom-line commercialism and racism...Bill was too risky, too moody, too much of a genius, too savvy, and too clever for the Hollywood moguls.”

Pearl Bowser, film historian, archivist, director (*Midnight Ramble: The Story of the Black Film Industry*) and friend of Bill Gunn will introduce *Ganja & Hess* on Friday, April 2. Premiering at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival to an ecstatic audience, this cult “vampire movie” stars Duane Jones (*Night of the Living Dead*) as an anthropologist with an assistant (played by Gunn himself) who dies after being stabbed from an accursed dagger. Showing in its full 100-minute director's cut (complete with its original score by Sam Waymon, who also acts in the film), this version is sixteen minutes longer than the mangled release cut, and was recently restored by the MoMA film archive due to the indefatigable efforts of Bowser herself.

During Bill Gunn's sadly abbreviated life he created art in myriad forms, including novels All the Rest Have Died and Rhinestone Sharecropping (a *roman à clef* describing his experiences in Hollywood, particularly during the making of the never released studio film *Stop*), plays *The Forbidden City* and *Black Picture Show* (both produced by Joseph Papp and the Public Theater), and the Emmy award-winning teleplay *Johnnas*. His screenplays include *The Landlord* and *The Angel Levine*, in addition to serving as writer and director on the films *Stop* and *Ganja & Hess*. Bill Gunn was also an actor who began his career in New York in the 50s (and forged a friendship with Montgomery Clift), and later appeared in Kathleen Collins' *Losing Ground* as well as on episodes of "The Cosby Show."

The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn opens on Thursday, April 1st with *Personal Problems* (1980), a video work directed by Gunn and written by Ishmael Reed. "A black soap opera unfolding in the melancholy of a blue note" (Steve Seid), it tells the story of a nurse (played by poet, writer, and NPR correspondent Vertamae Grosvenor) and her transit worker husband (Walter Cotton, who also produced the film) fed up with their lives in Harlem. *Stop* (1970—screening April 4), one of the first three Hollywood studio films ever to be directed by an African American (the other two being Gordon Parks' *The Learning Tree* and Melvin Van Peebles' *Watermelon Man*), was permanently shelved by its distributor and will be screened here in a rare VHS presentation. Screenings of the Hollywood-produced screenplays by Gunn will be *The Angel Levine* (also April 4), directed by Czech filmmaker Ján Kadár (*The Shop on Main Street*) and the Brooklyn-set *The Landlord*, a tale of race and gentrification directed by Hal Ashby.

**For press information, please contact
Gabriele Caroti at 718.636.4125 x3 / gcaroti@bam.org**

The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn schedule

Thursday, April 1

7pm: *Personal Problems*

Friday, April 2

6:50, 9:15pm: *Ganja & Hess*—Introduced by Pearl Bowser

Saturday, April 3

2, 4:30, 6:50, 9:15: *The Landlord*

Sunday, April 4

2pm: *Stop*—Free screening on VHS

4:30, 6:50, 9:15: *The Angel Levine*

Detailed film descriptions for *The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn*:

The Angel Levine (1970) 104min

Directed by Ján Kadár

Screenplay by Bill Gunn

With Zero Mostel, Harry Belafonte, Ida Kaminska

An adaptation of the whimsical Bernard Malamud story about an elderly Jewish tailor (Mostel) who suffers from a bad back, a dying wife, and financial problems. Just as things are at their worst, a black Jewish man (Belafonte playing the bad boy of heaven) shows up in his kitchen claiming to be an angel from God sent to help.

Sunday, April 4 at 4:30, 6:50, 9:15

Ganja & Hess (1973) 100min

Directed by Bill Gunn

With Marlene Clark, Duane Jones, Bill Gunn

Cult hero Duane Jones (star of *Night of the Living Dead*) plays a doctor who, after traveling through Africa, takes on the characteristics of a vampire. A hard-to-find masterpiece of 70s American cinema, the film is a complete original, mind-bending and brutal. "One of the most beautiful and unusual films ever produced in the United States" – Ishmael Reed

Friday, April 2 at 6:50, 9:15pm

The Landlord (1970) 112min

Directed by Hal Ashby

Screenplay by Bill Gunn

With Beau Bridges, Lee Grant, Diana Sands

WASP-y rich kid Elgar Enders (Bridges) buys an apartment building in then-gritty Park Slope with plans to evict the current residents and turn it into a ritzy home for himself. When the black tenants refuse to move out, however, Enders is launched into a series of comic misadventures that begin to change his outlook on life and attitude about race. Hal Ashby's pointed comedy strikingly predicts contemporary concerns regarding gentrification and presents a nuanced, daring exploration of race relations in America that is surprisingly ahead of its time.

Saturday, April 3 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, 9:15

Personal Problems (1980) 100min

Directed by Bill Gunn

With Vertamae Grosvenor, Walter Cotton, Jim Wright

A pioneering video work, which premiered at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and screened on WNYC in New York, is self-described by writer Ishmael Reed as an "avant-garde soap opera...which permitted black producers, a black director, black actors, and black writers and actresses to have control over their work.

Thursday, April 1 at 7pm

Stop (1970) 89min

Directed by Bill Gunn

With Marlene Clark

An emotionally violent poet and his wife leave their snowy confines and head to San Juan, their marriage imploding. Filmed in languorous soft light, the images turn from dreamlike to hallucinogenic when another couple enters their orbit. One of the first studio films by an African-American director, it is unique not for a focus on race, but for an experimental narrative and the introduction of a homosexual element—perhaps all reasons it was never released.

Sunday, April 4 at 2pm

Free screening on VHS

About BAMcinématek

The four-screen BAM Rose Cinemas (BRC) opened in 1998 to offer Brooklyn audiences alternative and independent films that might not play in the borough otherwise, making BAM the only performing arts center in the country with two mainstage theaters and a multiplex cinema. In July of 1999, beginning with a series celebrating the work of Spike Lee, BAMcinématek was born as Brooklyn's only daily year-round repertory film program. BAMcinématek presents new and rarely seen contemporary films, classics from cinema history, work by local artists, and festivals of films from around the world, often with special appearances by directors, actors, and other guests.

BAMcinématek has not only presented major retrospectives by well-known filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Shohei Imamura, Manoel de Oliveira, and Luchino Visconti, but it has also introduced New York audiences to contemporary artists such as Pedro Costa and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. In addition BAMcinématek programmed the first U.S. retrospectives of directors Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Arnaud Desplechin, and Hong Sang-soo. Recently BAMcinématek co-curated a three year summer collaboration of new feature/documentary/short films with the Sundance Institute, 2006–2008. BAMcinématek launched the first BAMcinemaFEST, June 17–July 2, 2009, a sixteen-day festival of new independent films and repertory favorites. From March 3–9, 2010, BAMcinématek and International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) will present films nominated for the 2010 VPRO Tiger Awards at the 39th IFFR in public and industry screenings.

Credits

Leadership support for BAMcinématek is provided by The Joseph S. and Diane H. Steinberg Charitable Trust.

BAM Rose Cinemas are named in recognition of a major gift in honor of Jonathan F.P. and Diana Calthorpe Rose. BAM Rose Cinemas would also like to acknowledge the generous support of The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation, The Estate of Richard B. Fisher, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, Brooklyn Delegation of the New York City Council, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Bloomberg, and Time Warner Inc. Additional support for BAMcinématek is provided by The Grodzins Fund, and The Liman Foundation.

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General Information

BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, BAM Rose Cinemas, and BAMcafé are located in the Peter Jay Sharp building at 30 Lafayette Avenue (between St Felix Street and Ashland Place) in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn. BAM Harvey Theater is located two blocks from the main building at 651 Fulton Street (between Ashland and Rockwell Places). Both locations house Shakespeare & Co. at BAM kiosks. BAM Rose Cinemas is Brooklyn's only movie house dedicated to first-run independent and foreign film and repertory programming. BAMcafé, operated by Great Performances, is open for dining prior to Howard Gilman Opera House performances. BAMcafé also features an eclectic mix of spoken word and live music for BAMcafé Live on Fridays (starting in March) with a special BAMcafé Live menu available starting at 8pm.

Subway: 2, 3, 4, 5, Q, B to Atlantic Avenue;
D, M, N, R to Pacific Street; G to Fulton Street; C to Lafayette Avenue
Train: Long Island Railroad to Flatbush Avenue
Bus: B25, B26, B41, B45, B52, B63, B67 all stop within three blocks of BAM
Car: Commercial parking lots are located adjacent to BAM

For ticket and BAMbus information, call BAM Ticket Services at 718.636.4100, or visit BAM.org.

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