

Sidney Poitier, trailblazing Black Oscar winner, dies at 94



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Nassau, January 7 (RHC)-- Sidney Poitier, who broke racial barriers to become the first U.S. Black actor to win the best actor Oscar award and inspired a generation during the United States civil rights movement, has died, officials said. He was 94.

Eugene Torchon-Newry, acting director general of the Bahamian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirmed his death on Friday.

Poitier created a distinguished film legacy in a single year with three 1967 films at a time when segregation prevailed in much of the United States.

In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, he played a Black man with a white fiancée and in *In the Heat of the Night*, he was Virgil Tibbs, a Black police officer confronting racism during a murder investigation. He also played a teacher in a tough London school that year in *To Sir, With Love*.

Poitier won his history-making best actor Oscar for *Lilies of the Field* in 1963, playing a handyman who helps German nuns build a chapel in the desert. Five years before that, Poitier had been the first Black man nominated for a lead actor Oscar for his role in *The Defiant Ones*.

But stardom did not shield Poitier from racism and condescension. He had a hard time finding housing in Los Angeles, California and was followed by the Ku Klux Klan when he visited Mississippi in 1964, not long after three civil rights workers had been murdered there. In interviews, journalists often ignored his work and asked him instead about race and current events.

His life ended in adulation, but it began in hardship. Poitier was born prematurely, weighing just 3 pounds (1.4kg), on February 20, 1927, in Miami, where his parents had gone to deliver tomatoes from their farm on tiny Cat Island in the Bahamas.

He spent his early years on the island, and at age 12 he quit school to help support the family. Three years later, he was sent to live with a brother in Miami as his father was concerned that the street life of Nassau was a bad influence.

With \$3 in his pocket, Poitier travelled in steerage on a mail-cargo ship. The young actor got his first break when he met the casting director of the American Negro Theater. He was an understudy in *Days of Our Youth* and took over when the star, Harry Belafonte, who also would become a pioneering Black actor, fell ill.

Poitier picked his roles with care, burying the old Hollywood idea that Black actors could appear only in demeaning contexts as shoeshine boys, train conductors and maids.

"I love you, I respect you, I imitate you," Denzel Washington, another Oscar winner, once told Poitier at a public ceremony.

In all, he acted in more than 50 films and directed nine, starting in 1972 with *Buck and the Preacher*, in which he co-starred with Belafonte.

In 1992, Poitier was given the Life Achievement Award by the American Film Institute, the most prestigious honour after the Oscar.

In 2002, an honorary Oscar recognised "his remarkable accomplishments as an artist and as a human being".

Poitier married actress Joanna Shimkus, his second wife, in the mid-1970s. He had six daughters with his two wives and wrote three books.

“If you apply reason and logic to this career of mine, you’re not going to get very far,” he told The Washington Post. “The journey has been incredible from its beginning. So much of life, it seems to me, is determined by pure randomness.”

Poitier was knighted by Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II in 1974 and served as the Bahamian ambassador to Japan and to UNESCO, the United Nations cultural agency.

In 2009, Poitier was awarded the highest U.S. civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, by then-President Barack Obama. The 2014 Academy Awards ceremony marked the 50th anniversary of Poitier’s historic Oscar and he was there to present the award for best director.

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