

Red Stained: The Life of Hilda Simms

Jokeda “JoJo” Bell

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During the mid-twentieth century, Cold War fears compounded the challenges faced by African American performers. Drawing attention to injustices could land actors on Hollywood’s blacklist or the FBI’s watch list for being communist sympathizers. Examples of this magnified discrimination are explored in JoJo Bell’s book *Red Stained: The Life of Hilda Simms*, featuring a Black actress whose activist ways and progressive circles landed her in hot water. The biography follows Simms to look at the people, places, and events that shaped her, beginning with her childhood in Minneapolis, where she was born in 1918. Her young adult years were spent working at the Phyllis Wheatley Center and in whatever small Twin Cities theater roles she could land. Following studies in education at the University of Minnesota, which still had segregated dorms, Simms moved to the Jim Crow South for a teaching fellowship at Hampton University, a historically Black institution. At both schools, she participated in campus theater while entertaining dreams of bigger stages.

Like many actors of color, Simms was frustrated by the lack of opportunities to showcase her talents and bring complex characters to life. Most available roles upheld racist stereotypes and character tropes like the “mammy” or the “tragic mulatto.” In 1944, Simms was finally able to step into a spotlight during her time with the American Negro Theatre in the play *Anna Lucasta*. She toured with the production to Broadway and Chicago, gaining rave reviews. She also began performing for US military personnel abroad with the United Service Organizations (USO) and working in wartime broadcasting, where she found subversive ways to work around the gov-



ernment censors, sneaking in stories of Black uplift.

Simms hoped that more opportunities would exist for her in Europe, but the scene abroad was not what it once had been for Black performers. Fellow artists and activists—including Edith Piaf, Pablo Picasso, and Minnesota’s own Gordon Parks—also make an appearance in Bell’s chapters on Simms’s expat years. Amid a lack of work and financial losses, Simms returned home.

Back in the United States in the 1950s, Simms caught a few short-lived television roles, and returned to the airwaves at WOV Negro Broadcasting Company in New York City. She continued to use her voice to enact change, testifying before the House Committee on Education and Labor on unequal hiring practices affecting women of color.

Preparing for another USO tour in 1960, Simms learned that her passport had been revoked and that she had been under FBI surveillance for nearly a decade. No details about the FBI report, or what became of it, are revealed. At the back of the book, a message titled “A Notice on Silences in the Archives”

explains that the author submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the federal government to get the FBI’s files on Simms, but that request had yet to be filled after an extremely long wait. Without those files, using the words “red stained” in the book’s title feels speculative beyond some tangential connections between Simms and communist-affiliated groups and fellow actors.

Throughout the book, the author makes good use of Simms’s personal papers, theater ephemera, and oral histories with family members. News clippings from the African American newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, interviews with *Jet* magazine, and stunning photographs help bring Simms to life. The author engages with scholarship from Dr. Charlene Regester and other leading Black film scholars to highlight how Simms’s story paralleled those of Fredi Washington, Lena Horne, and other light-skinned actresses who were not Black enough to fit into Hollywood’s limited expectations. Incorporating more secondary resources about intersectionality would have been useful, however: for example, Pauli Murray’s *Jane Crow*, or Erik S. McDuffie’s scholarship on Black feminism and American Communism.

Although *Red Stained* does not manage to provide solid evidence that Simms’s politics derailed her rise in Hollywood, the book still has merit. It provides a window into a burgeoning civil rights movement. Additionally, the book does a great job of providing historical context into topics like the ghosts of minstrelsy seen in theater and film, and the parallels to similar complex histories of race and patriotism, such as the 1936 professional boxing fight between undefeated African American Joe Louis and Germany’s Max Schmeling. Overall, Bell weaves together a thoughtful and well-researched biography of a woman who should be on more people’s radars.

—Karen Sieber



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