

REVIEW

Josephine Baker: From actress to activist

Entertainer made use of position to make political statements on racism, discrimination

By **Maghie Ghali**
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The fourth edition of Beirut Art Film Festival screened its opening film Tuesday night at Metropolis Cinema-Sofil, projecting the world premiere of Ilana Navaro's "Josephine Baker, the Story of an Awakening."

The documentary blends archival footage and photos, voiced diary entries from Baker and the input of three experts in history and African-American civil rights to flesh out the story of the first black international starlet-turned-activist.

Founded in 2015, BAFF annually shows local and international fiction and documentary films, catering to lovers of the arts. This year's edition will offer a selection of 60 films under the theme of "Tomorrow" and how we can learn from the past to better the future.

The documentary begins with footage of Baker dancing a wild Charleston on a cabaret stage, before cutting to her speaking alongside Martin Luther King, dressed in a decorated military uniform. Though both opposing images, they capture the essence of everything she built and strived for.

Born in 1906 in St. Louis, Baker was sent to work for a white mistress at six, running away at 13 after abuse. Making it to New York in 1922, she discovered a growing black cabaret scene and started working as an entertainer, eventually being scouted for an all-black show in Paris.

In Paris she found unparalleled fame, giving a fresh, uninhibited dance experience which played of white fantasies of the "exotic savage." Her daring acts made her the poster child for the modernist artistic movement in Europe leading to an acting and music career.

Following her success, she visited New York in 1936, hoping that racism and discrimination has lessened, only to find not one hotel would give her a room. Returning to Paris, the French resistance distracted her from her disappoint-

ment in her homeland. Acting as a spy for the French against the Nazis, she hid messages in her sheet music, using her fame as cover and touring to perform for the troops whilst collecting information.

With the war over, Baker turned her attention back to the black rights issues in America. She began using her position as an entertainer to make political statements, refusing to perform shows that would not allow black people to attend, resulting in the FBI declaring her an enemy of the state and barring her from the U.S.

It wasn't until years later she was invited back with help from Martin Luther King to support and give a voice to the black rights movement.

Despite the serious nature of the documentary, the film is charming to watch, as viewers see Baker grow as a person and shake foundations around the world. The splendor of the '20s is reflected in her unapologetic nature, taking both the criticism and the praise she received with grace. For those who have only heard her name in passing or younger audiences who never encountered her, the documentary is eye-opening and informative of a woman who history should not forget.



An archival photo from "Josephine Baker, the Story of an Awakening."