

Tuesday - December 5th

Filmmaker James E. Hurd, Jr. Presents "Turpentine Jake" and "Poet of the Swingin' Blade"

Based on the Turpentine Industry the Revealing Play and the Powerful Film Short Shed Light on Debt Peonage Servitude in Turpentine Camps in So. Florida

LOS ANGELES, CA - Veteran film and television actor turned playwright/filmmaker, James E. Hurd, Jr. will present scenes from the stage play *Turpentine Jake* and a short film "Poet of the Swingin' Blade" and stage play "Turpentine Jake" both, stories about the hardships and debt peonage servitude that Blacks faced in the early 1900's through the 1960's at the Kohl Players in Los Angeles on Tuesday, December 5, 2006. These works are essentially "Blues Dramas."

History books go into great detail about slaves working in the cotton fields and now James E. Hurd sheds light on the plight of workers who got caught up in a system that produced ultimately zero income for hard laborers in turpentine camps in Florida's pan handle. So called "hired" workers agreed to work in the forest cutting down and chipping away at trees to extract the sap, which would be taken to distilleries to make turpentine for various medicinal and industrial purposes.

According to the writers, James E. Hurd, Jr. and Professor Linda Bannister, Ph.D., the workers' quotas of cutting 2500 trees per



Turpentine workers worked under harsh conditions not unlike to enslavement until the late 1960's day, per man were literally back breaking work. If you did not make your quota you would be fogged or penalized monetarily. In exchange for their work, laborers would receive housing and necessary items such as food and toiletries with huge mark-ups that they would buy in a general store. They were also encouraged to buy alcohol to keep them drunk and manageable. The cost of these items would then be deducted from their salaries, leaving them virtually penniless.

Hurd's stories are based

on reality. His grandfather Jake Hurd, who he describes as a tall proud manly Black man known as Turpentine Jake was one of those victims who finally overcame the system. Papa Jake would tell young Hurd what happened to the men working in these turpentine camps in South Florida. It is his story as well as those he knew. These men were beaten flogged and hung for any excuse. There were also health hazards such as exposure to carcinogens however long term effects were not documented. They were also subject to bears, wolves and danger from wild animals in the forest. If workers tried to run away woods riders would come after them like slaves even though they were freed men, fine them for bad con-

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"Turpentine Jake" and "Poet of the Swingin' Blade"

duct and take their salaries away.

Their working conditions and terms were a catch twenty-two revolving door with no way out. Their only comfort came when they gathered together at night singing songs much like the blues set to the rhythm of foot tapping and harmonica playing and telling myths based on the forest and spirits. This was their only entertainment. Some say boogie-woogie had its roots in the music of the turpentine workers.

In brief, turpentine workers used two kinds of rhetoric available to those on the margins: subversive conversation (marked by subtleties unavailable to the whites they engaged) and folktales (marked by a glorification of the physical and mental prowess of the worker heroes featured, noting their strong connection to the natural world, and dependence on the supernatural world it represented). This rhetoric had the power of manipulation over those who would exclude them, and a strength of spirituality nurtured by the world around them.

"Poet of the Swingin' Blade" is such a tale caught on film as spoken word poetry in motion while the accompanying stage play "Turpentine Jake" depicts the cruel and torturous hardship in the life of these camp laborers. The industry was not limited to the South but started in the North and as trees were depleted they moved workers south to Georgia and the Florida regions were it became big business. The myths surrounding the workers are an intriguing part of this piece, including



Turpentine workers are shown here chipping pine trees and dipping turpentines.



Child workers were used profusely in these abusive camps.

part of this piece, including forest stories.

James E. Hurd, Jr. has an extensive experience as an actor in films including "Columbus Day", "Someday in Mississippi", and "Repo Jake"; television series including The Precinct, General Hospital, and Murder She Wrote, and theatre including Eldridge Cleaver's "Soul on Ice", *Mighty Genie*, and of course "Turpentine Jake". In addition

to filmmaking and writing, Hurd worked for over a decade in the art departments of feature films including *The Five Heartbeats*, *Sneakers*, *Next Friday*, *Batman*, *What Lies Beneath*. Dr. Linda Bannister is a professor of English at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and earned her Ph.D. in Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literature from U.S.C. She and writing partner James E. Hurd, Jr. had their play "One Sunday in Mississippi" selected for presentation at the National Blackstar Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem in 2003, and their work has also been seen at various theatre venues in the Los Angeles area.

Whether picking cotton, or cutting trees, the burden of these fields to forest industries lay on the back of predominantly Black men and women. James E. Hurd, Jr. will present the screening of "Poet of the Swingin' Blade" and his play "Turpentine Jake" in a night of staged readings with the Kohl Players, an organization that he founded with co-writing partner Linda Bannister, scheduled for December 5, 2006. Doors open at 6:45 p.m. with Showtime at 7:30 sharp! The Kohl Players are located at 5299 W. Washington Blvd. (at Burnside) in Los Angeles, CA 90016. For more information, call (323) 548-9026.

