

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Canada Lee

(May 3, 1907 – May 9, 1952)

“Actor, Boxer, Jockey, Activist”

Canada Lee was born Leonard “Lee” Lionel Cornelius Canagata on May 3, 1907, in the San Juan Hill district of New York City. He attended Public School 5 in Harlem and studied music as a child. At the age of 14, Lee ran away from home, traveling to Upstate New York to the Saratoga Racetrack. There he worked as a jockey first, later becoming a horse exerciser for wealthy racehorse owners.



In 1932 Lee returned to Harlem and began fighting in amateur boxings matches, winning 90 out of 100 fights over a three-year period. He won the Metropolitan Inter-City and Junior National Championships and the national amateur lightweight title. During one amateur fight, the announcer misread the name card for “Canagata, Lee” as “Canada Lee”. Lee turned professional boxer by age 19 and officially changed his name to Canada Lee.



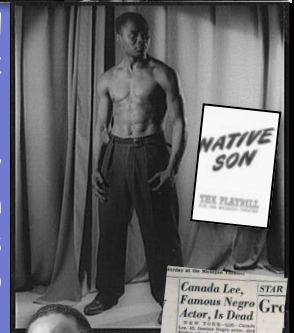
Canada continued professional fighting and by 1930, was the leading contender for the welterweight championship, winning 175 out of 200 fights. Unfortunately, in 1933, a damaging blow to his right eye, caused a detached retina, ending his professional boxing career. After a brief return to music, Canada auditioned for a role in the theatrical production of *Brother Mose*; a production funded by the Work Progress Administration (WPA). Canada was offered the role, but his interest was in motion pictures, where the pay was better than the theater.

In 1935, Canada scored a role as a dock worker in Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Lifeboat*. It was the first major Hollywood film where the black character appeared in a non-stereotypical role, working alongside white main characters.



Canada knew the significance of the role, so he insisted on changing the scripted dialog of his character by removing repeated “yassirs and nahsurs” that made him sound subservient to the other characters.

The next year he appeared in the all-black production of “Macbeth” by John Houseman and Orson Welles, where he won his first critical acclaim as Banquo. In 1939, he had a featured role as Draylon in “Mamaba’s Daughters”, starring Ms. Ethel Waters. He also narrated the CBS radio program, “Flow Gently, Sweet Rhythm”, a national Sunday afternoon radio series.



In 1941, Canada achieved national fame when he played Bigger Thomas in the stage “adaptation of Richard Wright’s, *Native Son*. He appeared in six other films throughout the 1940s, playing a sailor in *South Pacific* in 1943, and a prizefighter in *Body and Soul* in 1947. Canada vowed that he would only take roles that educated society about race and enhanced the image of black people. His devotion to equality was reflected in his theatrical and film roles.

Canada's starring role as minister Stephen Kumalo in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, working alongside Sidney Poitier, would be his last film. On May 9, 1952, Canada Lee died of a heart attack. He was just 45 years old.

