



**NOTHING BUT A MAN is a February, 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Here's Kino Ken's review of that dvd release.**

**16 of a possible 20 points**

**\*\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**United States 1964 black-and-white 95 minutes live action  
feature drama DuArt Film and Video / Nothing But a Man Company  
Producers: Michael Roemer, Robert Rudin, and Robert Young**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance  
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**Points:**

- 2 Direction: Michael Roemer\***
- 1 Editing: Luke Bennett**
- 2 Cinematography: Robert Young\***
- 2 Lighting: Frank Sukosd**
- 1 Written by: Michael Roemer and Robert Young**
- 2 Music: Janie Bradford, Henry Crosby, Lamont Dozier,  
Berry Gordon, Jr., Brian Holland, Eddie Holland,  
Clarence Paul, William "Smokey" Robinson, Mary Wells**
- Harmonica: Wilbur Kirk**

**1        Locations**  
**2        Sound: Robert Rubin, Al Gramaglia (mixer)**  
**2        Acting**  
**1        Creativity**  
**16 total points**

**Cast: Ivan Dixon\* (Duff Anderson), Abbey Lincoln\* (Josie), Julius Harris (Will Anderson, Duff's father), Gloria Foster\* (Lee), Martin Priest\* (Mill Worker), Leonard Parker\* (Frankie), Yaphet Kotto (Jocko), Stanley Greene (Rev. Dawson), Helen Lounck (Effie Simms), Helene Arrindell (Doris), Walter Wilson\* (Car Owner), Milton Williams\* (Pop), Mel Stewart (Riddick), Marshal Tompkin (Revivalist), Alfred Puryear (Barney), Charles McRea (Joe), Ed Rowan (Willie), Tom Ligon (Teenager), William Jordan (Teenager), Dorothy Hall\* (Soloist), Gertrude Jeannette (Mrs. Dawson), Gil Rogers\* (Mill Foreman), Richard Webber\* (Garage Owner), Jim Wright (Barman), Arland Schubert (Hiring Boss), Peter Carew\* (Storekeeper), Bill Riola (Gin Foreman), Jay Brooks\* (Undertaker), Robert Berger (Desk Clerk), Jary Banks (Bessie), Richard Ward (Mill Hand), Moses Gunn (Mill Hand), Mark Shapiro (Car Passenger), William Phillips (Car Passenger), Sylvia Ray (Church Woman), Esther Rolle (Church Woman), Evelyn Davis (Church Woman), others**

**In 1964, no Hollywood studio cared to risk producing a motion picture drama about black Americans. So native German Michael Roemer, a former Kindertransport child, and cameraman Robert Young, a New Yorker with intense interest in shooting documentaries, decided to make one independently, spending**

three months under NAACP supervision touring the American South for research purposes. What eventually emerged in the aftermath was a live action feature drama, **NOTHING BUT A MAN**, co-starring a pre-*Hogan's Heroes* Ivan Dixon and activist jazz singer Abbey Lincoln.

Giving protagonist Duff Anderson a working class background as roaming gandy dancer attempting to stay afloat financially in still-segregated Dixie, co-scriptors Roemer and Young focused on an unexceptional character whose wayward life mirrored common black male experiences. Dixon himself claimed much of his own personality matched Duff's, though the two travelled in quite different social circles, with the actor bypassing the sexually reckless practices of his screen character.

Duff is proud, negligent of paternal responsibility, ashamed of his own father, determined not to follow in the elder man's footsteps. His manhood is equated with keeping gainfully employed. Later on, when that condition temporarily ends, a different persona emerges. One violent, desperate, and abusive.

While still working for a railroad company, Duff one evening treks off into town from a nondescript bunkhouse shared with others in his work crew. He's weary of card games, checkers, and crude jokes about women, seeking something more satisfying and permanent. Neither tavern drinking nor offer from local prostitute holds any appeal.

Moving on to an evangelical black church in the same vicinity, Duff eyes appreciatively the minister's twenty-something unmarried daughter. Josie is vulnerable, with no fiancé in sight and a teaching job committing her to remain in place, however impoverishing that might prove both to spirit and pocketbook. Her school enrolls black students only, being funded as a separate and

unequal poor relative within the town's overall educational system.

Duff resists easily both soulful singing and pious sermonizing from a preacher who bends so far backwards to accommodate white upper crust he's soon likely to topple over. Duff follows a more abrasive pathway. Prospects of home cooking and starting a true family of his own are temptations. He assiduously courts Josie, heedless of disapproval directed his way by her honorable parents. They fear their daughter will end up a single mom with absentee spouse and have plenty of grounds for that suspicion in Duff's non-committal behavior.

Cooped up and alone is the situation Duff has imposed on his prior girlfriend. Fed up with constant caretaking of an emotionally needy preschooler and lacking any legal claim on the child's father, its overwhelmed mother dumped the boy on another woman, hightailing it out of Birmingham with a new boyfriend. She took along as bonus money Duff had mailed her for maintenance of their son. This the man learns from a stranger who has undertaken sheltering his four-year-old, who's neither kin nor particularly desired.

While in Birmingham, Duff's tipped off about his dad's residence in the neighborhood. He pays that elusive parent a call, finding himself initially welcomed as a symbol of respectability flung in the face of live-in partner Lee. The more these two converse, however, the greater a divide that opens between them. Will Anderson is a wastrel deadbeat. Duff sees in him a possible future he wishes heartily to escape. Yet he can't stave off personal devils alone, needing a support like Lee or Josie to buttress flagging self-respect when firings for insubordination or instigating trouble leave him jobless.

**It's still a predominantly white world in which Duff moves, one constantly baiting and snaring him, causing frustrations he unloads by shoving a pregnant wife to the floor.**

**That doesn't reduce either external or internal pressures squeezing him. If he won't leave the South, then Duff must find himself a rooted place in the community. Which will be harder than ever after he delivers a scathing condemnation of the stooping obeisance through which Josie's dad remains acceptable to white civic leaders. Even reclamation of a sleepy son might be nothing more than another burden too heavy for bearing alone.**

**Can Duff and Josie find happiness together in such a toxic environment?**

**Buoyed by a persistent background stream of Motown hit songs by Smokey Robinson, Mary Wells, and the trio consisting of brothers Eddie and Brian Holland along with mutual pal Lamont Dozier, NOTHING BUT A MAN draws no conclusions, content with presenting unvarnished reality for presumably ignorant white audiences requiring enlightenment. It still today seems brutally harsh, an unflinching record of white inhumanity to black neighbors. Prejudice seethes repeatedly into view, as when Duff travels to back country on a towing mission for his boss at the gas station during which his aloof taciturnity sparks resentment, and again in a showdown about honor with a mill boss intent on breaking apart beginnings of a worker's union for blacks.**

**Sound and lighting are amazingly refined in this restored version of a nickel-and-dime production. Editing is adequate; screenwriting perhaps a bit too consciously truckling to a white audience's perception of black conversation. A seam of poetry embedded in more recent dramatic dialogue by August Wilson is entirely missing**

here though it surely existed on street corners, parlors, and porches during the Civil Rights era.

Commendable mobility marks Robert Young's invasive cinematography, seen to best advantage in opening views as a handcar rolls through what can only be termed seldom seen slums. These are either expertly detailed mockups of blighted properties or absolutely the most derelict neighborhoods of southern New Jersey, where actual shooting of the film occurred.

Many illustrious careers launched in this film. The cast includes Esther Rolle as a church attendee extra, evocative spiritual singer Dorothy Hall, Yaphet Kotto as an understanding, congenial fellow worker on the rail crew, Gloria Foster in the role of world-weary faithful attendant Lee, Moses Gunn playing a cowardly mill hand, and Julius Harris, later a Blaxploitation movie icon, here a self-defeating, cynical alcoholic. This was the Philadelphia native's film debut and a very promising one.

The 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Edition dvd release of this landmark film by the New Video Group includes an eighteen-page illustrated booklet detailing the careers of Michael Roemer and Robert Young, as well as production anecdotes and reminders about what was happening in the country during filming. Other bonuses are cast and crew biographies, an excerpt from a short tribute film titled *Portrait of Abbey* featuring co-star and chanteuse Abbey Lincoln, and a featurette called "The Cast and Crew 40 Years Later."

With an unusually high quota of stellar acting achievements for an American independent film, **NOTHING BUT A MAN** is essential screening for viewers aged eighteen and older, a window into the explosive era when blacks and teenagers first wielded sufficient power to scare a jittery nation already reeling from Soviet, Cuban, and Chinese threats. Don't miss it.