

magazine

April 26, 1987

SUNDAY ADVOCATE



'A Gathering of Old Men'

Third Ernest Gaines work converted to film

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Spring has sprung
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Louis Gossett Jr., left, and Woody Strode in a scene from the TV movie

'A Gathering of Old Men'

Another Ernest Gaines work converted to film

By RUTH LANEY
Special to Magazine

The hand-lettered cardboard sign stuck on a fence post read "Gathering." A woman in a security van having waved him through, Ernest Gaines turned his car off Hwy. 308 onto a gravel road and proceeded past 12-foot-tall rows of sugar cane ready for cutting. But the dozens of people scurrying about Melodia Plantation weren't harvesting cane — they were making a movie.

Six miles south of Thibodaux, Ernest J. Gaines' latest novel, *A Gathering of Old Men*, was being filmed as a CBS Television Dramatic Special to be aired May 10 at 8 p.m. on Channel 9-WAFB.

Praised by the *Village Voice* as "the best-written novel on Southern race re-

lations in over a decade," *Gathering* (1983) is the third Gaines work to be converted to film. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) was made into a television special starring Cicely Tyson, winning nine Emmys in 1973. *The Sky Is Gray*, a short story from Gaines' *Bloodline* collection (1968), was filmed for the PBS American Short Story series in 1982.

Born near New Roads in 1933, Gaines left Louisiana at age 15 when his family moved to California. He divides his time between a flat in San Francisco and a house in Lafayette, where he teaches creative writing at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. This past fall, he took time from teaching and working on a new book of short stories to act as an unofficial consultant to the production of *Gathering*. (The book is set in the New Roads area, but the film crew chose Thibodaux because there wasn't enough cane growing in Pointe Coupee Parish!)

Gathering is about a group of Louisiana sharecroppers in their 70s who find sudden courage when faced with the need to defend a beloved fellow black. Mathu, who admits to killing a Cajun overseer, has always maintained his dignity in the face of the white man's demand for subservience, and he is as close to a hero as the old men have ever had. His dire predicament, which includes the possibility of being lynched, impels his friends to come to his aid, thus ending a lifetime of submissiveness. One by one, they dust off their rusting shotguns, fill them with shells and step forward, each claiming that *he* is the murderer.

The two-hour special will be a showcase for the talents of minority actors — most of them black, and most of them older than 50. Richard Widmark, 72, left semi-retirement to play Sheriff Mapes, who is trying to pre-

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By Louis
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Photos by Bob Greene, CBS

Gossett on porch, left, and Volker Schlöndorff directs Holly Hunter and Will Patton in a scene at right

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vent a confrontation between the old men and the dead man's vengeful family. Louis Gossett Jr., 50, best known for his work in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, plays the elderly Mathu, white-haired but still standing proud and tall.

The center of activity when Gaines arrived on the set was a weatherbeaten shack with double front doors. An old car seat rested on the front porch alongside a wooden bench. Ancient shutters hung crookedly from the doors and windows. A brick chimney rose from the tin roof.

Inside, the two-room shack contained torn linoleum, ripped wallpaper, an unmade iron bed, a battered chiffarobe and two ancient oscillating fans. A welter of cameras and lights filled every inch of available space. Crew members greeted Gaines with silent smiles as they squeezed around corners and tiptoed over wires. The climactic scene being shot was the gathering of old men inside Mathu's house.

Gossett, hair and beard whitened for the role, wore beat-up pants and a faded pink longjohn shirt. Just moments before, he had greeted Gaines with a joke, laughing and talking easily. Then, with cameras rolling he exuded a quiet intensity as he addressed the old men. Clad in battered clothes, each holding a shotgun, the men listened to him solemnly. Yank, Uncle Billy, Booker, Jacob, Mat, Cherry, Clatoo, Rufe, Rooster, Chimley, Clabber, Johnny Paul, Dirty Red — their eyes were fixed on Mathu as he told them that, because they had stood up to the white sheriff, "This is the proudest day of my life."

Someone gave me the book one weekend. I read it straight through on Sunday and phoned Gaines' agent on Monday. It came across very strongly as a film. Sometimes you read something you can just visualize as a film.

It was Gossett's big scene, and as it ended some of the crew members were misty-eyed. "Cut! Thank you, that's as far as we go," cried director Volker Schlöndorff. A short, balding man with a cigar clenched in his teeth, Schlöndorff works half the year in his native Germany and half in New York. Before heading south, he directed Dustin Hoffman in the award-winning TV version of *"Death of a Salesman."*

Schlöndorff gathered the old men from auditions in New York City, Los Angeles and New Orleans. While less well known than Widmark and Gossett, each has an impressive list of credits.

Joe Seneca, 65, was in *The Verdict* with Paul Newman; he has written *"Sesame Street"* scripts and hit songs. Woody Strode, 72, was one of the first two blacks to play collegiate football with whites, at UCLA before World War II. He later acted in John Ford Westerns and was a professional wrestler.

Sandman Sims, 68, has been a tap-dancer for 65 years; during production, he gave several impromptu tap demonstrations in the cocktail lounge of the Sheraton in Thibodaux, where the cast and crew were billeted.

Danny Barker, 77, is a New Orleans jazz guitarist and songwriter, author of such works as *"Save the Bones for Henry Jones ('Cause Henry Don't Eat No Meat)"* and *"Don't You Feel My Legs."* His autobiography, *A Life in Jazz*, was recently published simultaneously by Macmillan of London and the Oxford University Press.

Julius Harris, 65, and Tiger Haynes, 73, are New York actors with long lists of Broadway, film and television-commercial credits. Papa John Creach is a jazz/pop violinist who was a member of the rock bands Jefferson Airplane and Jefferson Starship; at 69, he is acting in his first film.

Rounding out the cast are Holly Hunter, who plays the plantation owner intent on protecting Mathu, and Will Pat-

ton as Holly's boyfriend, a Baton Rouge newspaper man. Patton was in *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Belizaire the Cajun*. Hunter appeared in the Broadway production of *"Crimes of the Heart"* and the movie *Swing Shift*. Dining on dolphin at a recent dinner with cast and crew at Lafitte's Landing, the young actress quizzed Gaines about the motivation behind her role as Candy. "I really feel close to this character," she observed.

Relaxing between takes on the set, British producer Gower Frost said he had no trouble identifying with Gaines' story of Southern black sharecroppers. "Someone gave me the book one weekend," he said. "I read it straight through on Sunday and phoned Gaines' agent on Monday. It came across very strongly as a film. Sometimes you read something you can just visualize as a film. I've read it a half-dozen times, and each time I see more in it. I like the way the story is told with overlaps through other people's eyes." Frost commissioned playwright Charles Fuller (*A Soldier's Story*) to write the script.

"Initially, I wasn't sure if we could come up with a screenplay to do justice to Gaines' unique style of writing," he said. "But I think we've done that."

Ernest Gaines insists he will stick to writing fiction rather than venture into screenplays. But he welcomes the opportunity to see others bring his work to the screen. Traveling home from his day on the set, he admitted a fascination with the possibility that, thanks to television, his *Old Men* may soon be as well known as Miss Jane Pittman. ■