

BY ROBERT GREIG

- ▶ **DOCUMENTARY:** The Man who Drove with Mandela
- ▶ **DIRECTOR:** Greta Schiller
- ▶ **WRITER:** Mark Gevisser
- ▶ **WHERE:** Gay and Lesbian Film Festival at Cinema Nouveau in Rosebank Mall

Living in a pressure-cooker society forces the sensitive to either become invisible or chameleons. Cecil Williams, living in Johannesburg in the '50 and '60s, did the latter. *The documentary of his life here – he died in happy exile in

Britain – is a picture of a world of frenetic partygoing, illicit relationships and political danger. Williams was a theatre director, a communist, and a party animal: the documentary explores all these. At the same time, it gets closer to the feeling of the times than any other record – Nadine Gordimer's novels apart. It's an

alluring, glittery atmosphere of uncertainty and danger, of mass action and personal braveries that Williams represents.

One of the film's achievements is conjuring up atmosphere: an atmosphere that combines the moral rectitude of the political crusade with some

feverish hedonism.

In retrospect, the lights were going out over South Africa – not that for black people they had been very bright. But even the crevices of free action and speech were closing.

This sense of dimming and entrapment gave an edge to social encounters and urgency to political action. The jackboots that had been defeated in Europe and the Far East had removed themselves to Pretoria. And paradoxically, many of those who had fought the Nazis in the

North African desert were prepared to let Nazis' natural heirs take over in South Africa.

Williams was Cornish-born, a man of extraordinary elegance, charm and wit. On the face of things, he was an unlikely communist and activist. But at his core was hard moral conviction and romantic courage.

The documentary depicts his slipping between many different

societies: the theatrical, the political and the social. It uses an actor to perform him, buttressing this with interviews with great theatre names like Corney Mbaso and Ken Gampu.

They recollect the shock of a white man serving them food, talking about him with amused, delighted disbelief. (In fact, when people talk about Williams, this is the dominant tone: amusement, pleasure, delight. Smiles spread on faces).

There are interviews with his communist colleagues and their accounts of coming to know that he

was gay. Albie Sachs talks firmly about the fact that Cecil's being gay was a factor in the ANC's adopting an enlightened policy for gay rights. And there are parties and parties, in the centre of town, at Anstey's Building where Williams lived.

This was a time when civil life also meant a civic, not suburban life.

Williams was a political activist with flair and conviction, but also a good deal of realism. He was jailed in the Fort in the state of emergency and was banned. He realised that banning was a death for him: he would become politically ineffective and personally he would wither. This was one reason for his leaving the country and, according to Gevisser's script, reaching a bargain with the person who got him out, to refrain

from political activity that would "damage South Africa" (meaning apartheid).

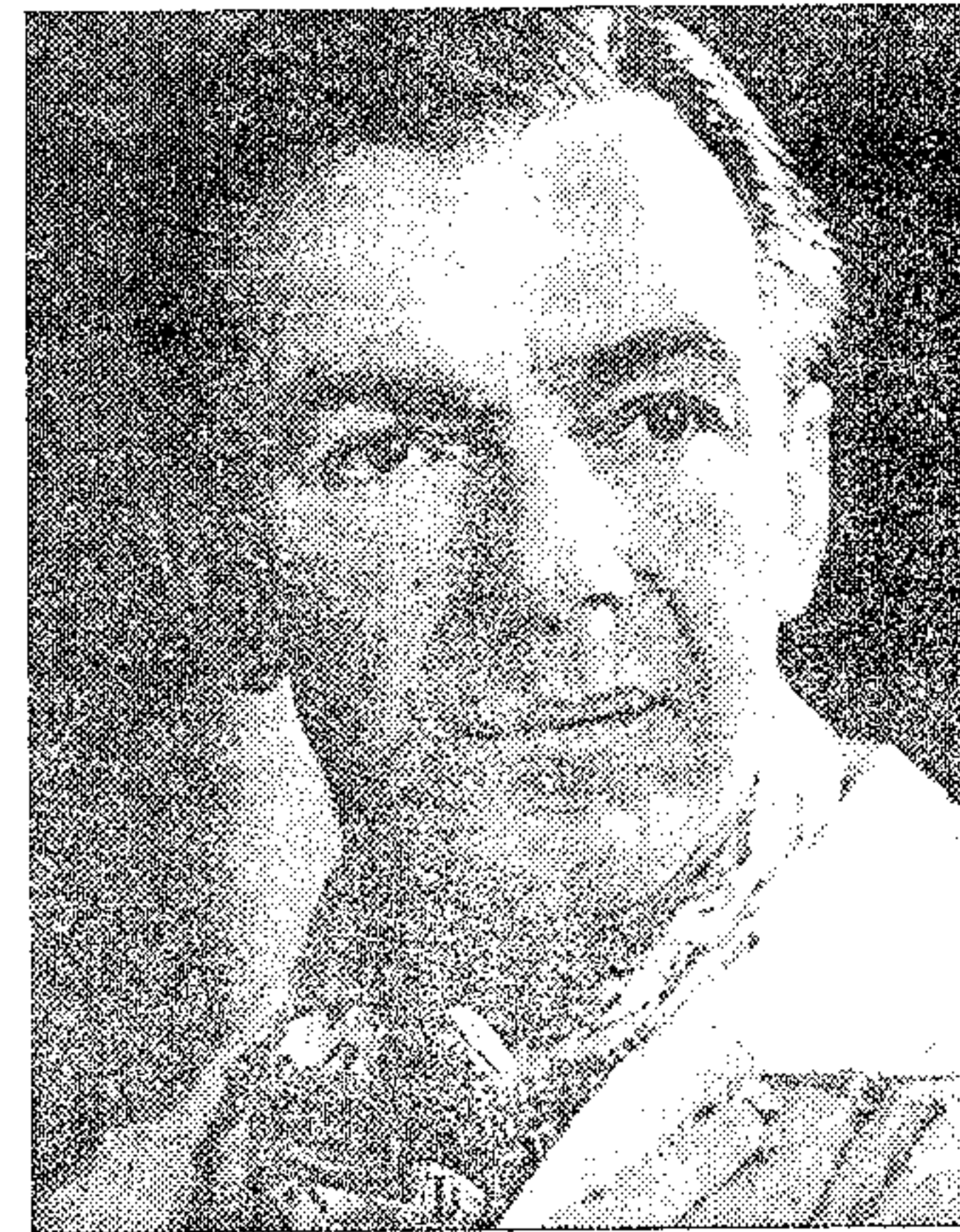
Williams was driving Mandela when Mandela was arrested after two years underground. This action brought one who was a really a foot-soldier of the struggle into prominence.

The film's accomplishment is its depiction of big issues – political commitment and its

relationship to sexual identity – through particulars.

The film partakes of the effervescence of Williams himself: there is little heavyhanded about it. The odd moments of laying rhetorical styles of people who would squirm at high-flown sentiment happen; the device of an actor, Corin Redgrave, playing Williams is questionable but one can live with it.

All in all, *The Man who Drove with Mandela* is fascinating. I couldn't help thinking of it as the draft of a full-length feature film.



Elegant party animal ... Cecil Williams also had political courage