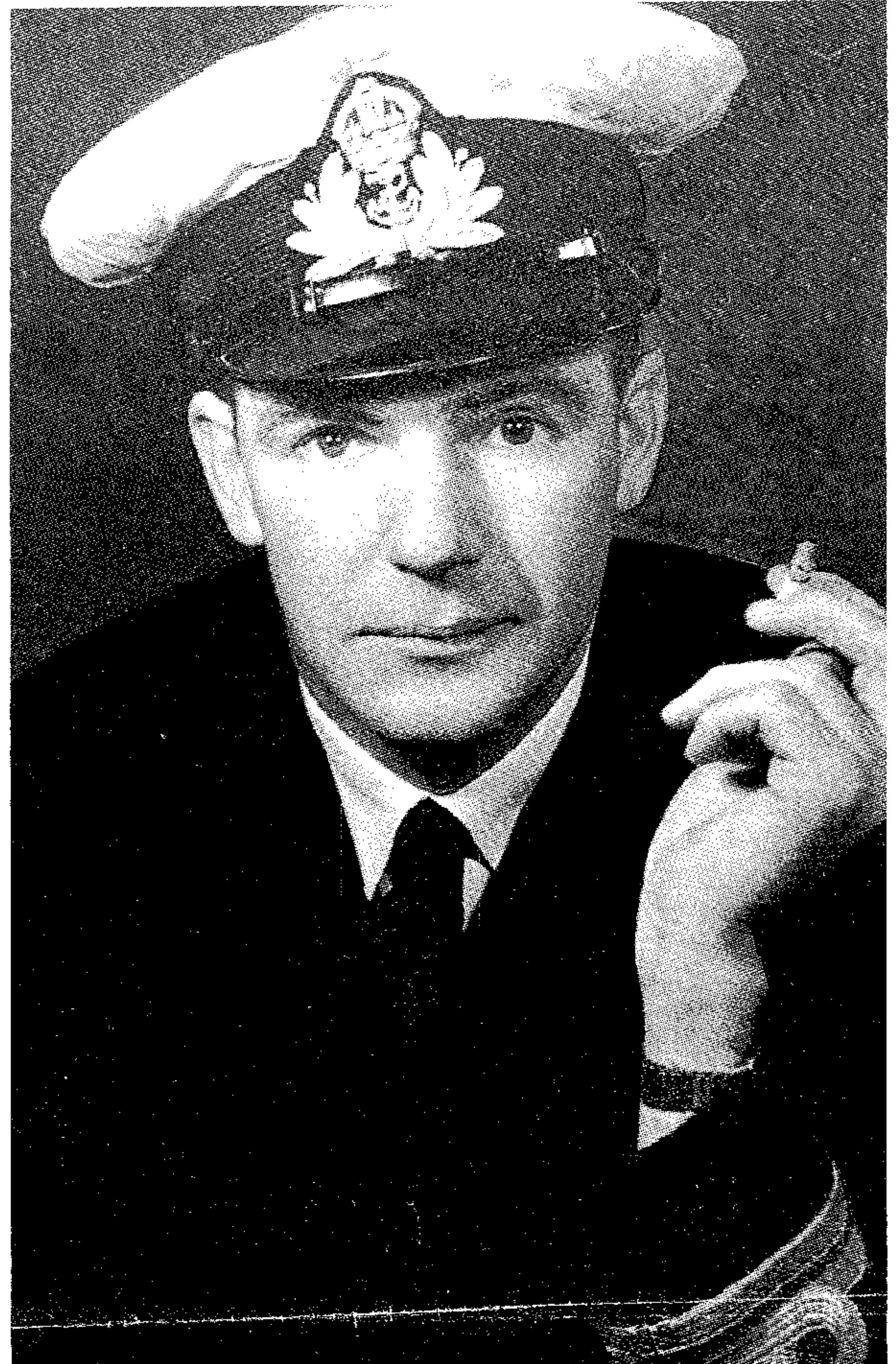


The actor and the hero

Vanessa Redgrave's brother Corin (left) plays the dapper Williams in the otherwise documentary-minded *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*.



REDGRAVE, WILLIAMS: COURTESY JEZEBEL PRODUCTIONS/BEULAH FILMS; MANDELA: NEWSMAKERS

television

Driving with Mr. Mandela

A new PBS documentary tells how wealthy socialite Cecil Williams helped steer black—and gay—rights in South Africa
By Richard Tate

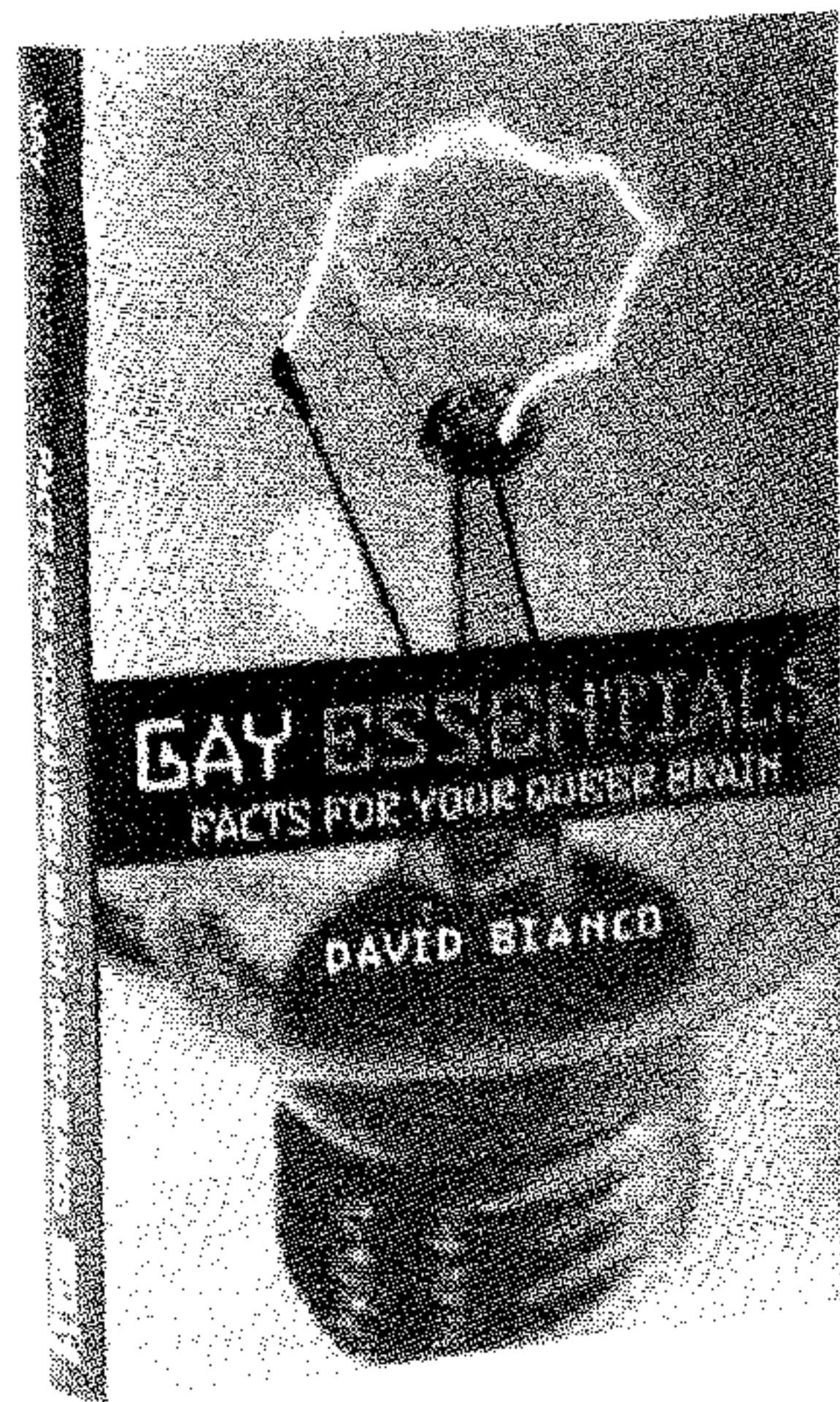
In 1962, on a dirt road in Howick, South Africa, Cecil Williams and Nelson Mandela were quietly arrested. For weeks Mandela had been posing as chauffeur to Williams, a handsome, aristocratic white man, to elude police while rallying support for the growing antiapartheid rebellion. But Williams abhorred the institutionalized servitude imposed on black South Africans, and that day he insisted on doing his share of the driving. The sight of Williams behind the wheel while Mandela rode in back was too odd for police to ignore, and the two men were recognized. Mandela was sentenced to life in prison; Williams, himself a freedom fighter—and a gay man—was released the following day.

Though Williams was a central figure in early antiapartheid activism, he died in exile



in London in 1979 and has been all but forgotten. *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, airing as part of the PBS Independent Lens series through November (check local listings), attempts to change that. Produced and directed by Greta Schiller (*Paris Was a Woman*) and written by journalist Mark Gevisser, the film is a pastiche of interviews with Williams's political comrades, home movies of gay life in South Africa in the '50s, and monologues based on Williams's writing that are performed in character by Corin Redgrave. "We never directly asked [Mandela] about Cecil's homosexuality," says Schiller, referring to a portion of the film in which the former president of South Africa recalls the events of that day. "But I knew he supported gay and lesbian people because he has openly gay people in his government, ►

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he included us in his inauguration speech, and he supports the repeal of all antigay laws. Albie Sachs [a South African constitutional court justice] told Mark that if you want to understand why the African National Congress is so tolerant of gay people, look to Comrade Cecil Williams.”

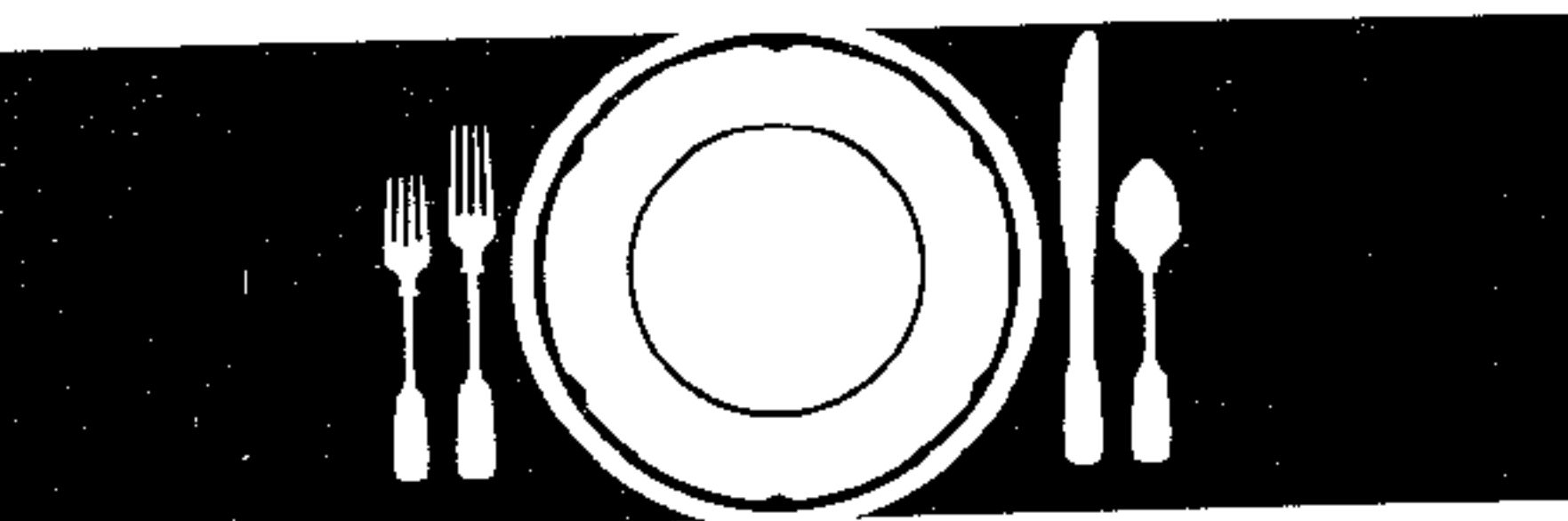
An acclaimed theater director in the 1950s, Williams was a prominent figure in the social scene of South Africa in spite of his subversive politics and gay life. In his penthouse apartment in Johannesburg, he threw fashionable dinner parties attended by Laurence Olivier, Danny Kaye, and Mandela—although never on the same night. And though he was tried for treason in 1959 for leading the Springbok Legion, the first antifascist group in South Africa, Williams continued his political activities and maintained a thriving theater career, directing shows with integrated casts.

What is striking about Williams’s life is that his politics never seemed to intersect with his identity as a gay man. Like Bayard Rustin, the gay man who worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. to organize the 1960s U.S. civil rights movement, Williams didn’t push specifically for gay rights. “I think he never dreamed of mixing the personal—his sex life—with the political,” Schiller says. “Those ideas came to the foreground much later in the world.”

But Williams and his unwavering commitment to equality made an impression on those who worked closely with him. Many of his associates knew he was gay even though he rarely discussed his personal life. So when apartheid fell and Mandela and Williams’s old friends found themselves responsible for ushering in a new era, South Africa became the first and only country in the world to provide constitutional civil rights protections to gay men and lesbians—a significant legacy. “For a number of elder statesmen of the liberation movement, Cecil was crucial in changing their ideas about whether or not one could trust a pervert,” Schiller says. “He put his own career and personal life at risk for a greater cause.” ■

Tate is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.

For more on *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, visit www.advocate.com



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