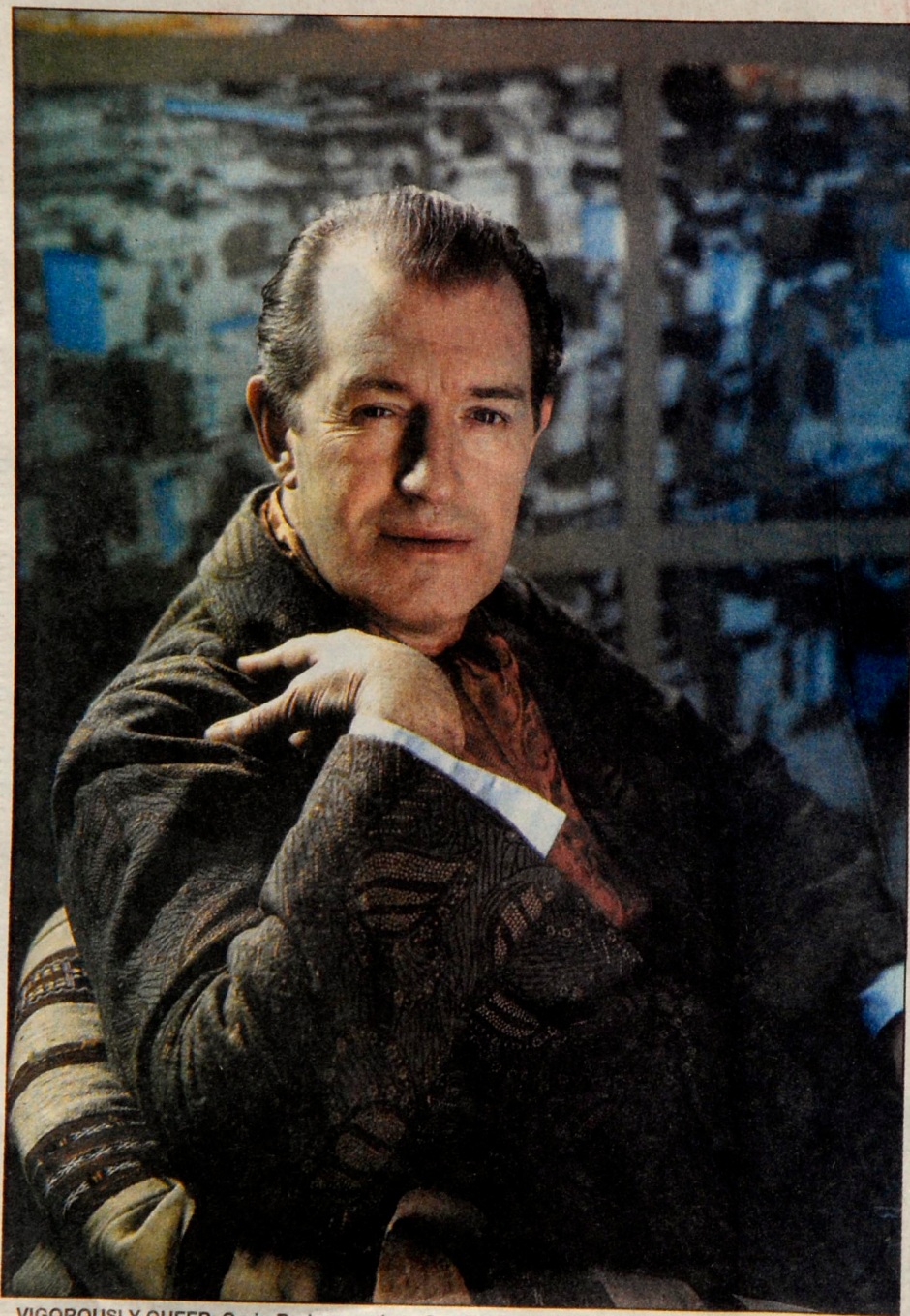


SUNDAY REVIEW

VIGOROUSLY QUEER: Corin Redgrave plays Cecil Williams in *The Man who Drove with Mandela*

THE annual Gay and Lesbian Film Festival has returned for the fifth time and if you want some sense of how fresh and interesting it is, look at the poster: a big man in a kilt.

Looks-wise, he is everything the current canon of gay beauty despises. He is not young, he's burly, balding and pot-bellied. This is no gym-trimmed Muscle Mary. In the picture his kilt is being blown up by air from a pavement grating, just as Marilyn Monroe's signature white dress was wafted aloft so many years ago.

It is a brilliant poster, a witty oblique mockery of key gay stereotypes. It says: "There's much more to gay life than men in frocks being camp about old movie stars."

The excellent line-up of films from all over the world takes that same quizzical line on gay issues, and I am happy to report that one of the best of them comes from South Africa.

The Man who Drove with Mandela was researched and written by Mark Gevisser and directed by Greta Schiller. It is a semi-biographical portrait of Cecil Williams, who was being "chauffeured" by Nelson Mandela on the day the future President was arrested near Maritzburg.

Williams was a communist and ANC activist. His handler was Joe Slovo. He was a dedicated campaigner and recruiter of ANC members, and he was also flamboyantly, vigorously queer.

We learn the facts of Williams's life via excerpts from a biographical one-man play performed by Corin Redgrave. This is filmed on a set, with highly theatrical lighting, and Redgrave's plummy and detailed performance gives us a keen sense of the man.

These performed fragments are flanked by interviews with party activists who worked closely with Williams, by his colleagues in the theatre, both black and white, and by some wonderful archive footage.

But it is not just the life story of Cecil Williams. It is a brisk, intelligent portrait of how the political and intellectual dissenters of the '50s and '60s lived and operated in Johannesburg.

We glimpse the way the shebeens and nightclubs of the city worked, how its theatre and music industries created a space for interracial mixing and understanding. It is also a fascinating examination of what gay life was like in Johannesburg at that time.

The film is a kaleidoscope of stories fitted intricately together but hinged on the fact that on the day Mandela was captured the comrade in the car with him was a white gay man.

It is an important film but also a fascinating and entertaining one. It could

Fag-hags, porn stars and the gay Mandela drove



BARRY RONGE AT THE MOVIES

have been more tightly edited and I would have liked to see perhaps a little more interrogation of how the ANC and communist party really felt about gays.

In the film, Albie Sachs claims that it was the influence of Williams that led to the ANC's present trendsetting policies on gay rights. But Mandela sort of dodges the issue and relates the events of his capture in a deadpan way.

Walter Sisulu is downright embarrassed when questioned about Williams's sexuality. He mutters something about being conservative on such matters and that's that.

A closer interrogation of the interface between those who were disenfranchised because of their colour and political choices and those who were marginalised because of their sexual orientation would have enriched the film — but one can't have everything.

The Man who Drove with Mandela is nonetheless a first-rate South African movie and it is wonderful to see it in this festival.

Looking at the international films on offer, I would suggest that you see *Chocolate Babies*, a bracing, abrasive,

stunning movie about AIDS activism.

In one scene a black transsexual jazz singer tells her audience: "There are two kinds of AIDS in America. There's Magic Johnson AIDS ... Then there's the AIDS you get from f***ing and shooting up heroin."

The rest of the monologue is a searing diatribe against the new AIDS bigotry. There is the "tragic" middle-class AIDS that strikes people seemingly by accident, and provides heart-warming photo opportunities for glossy magazines and in-depth TV reports.

Then there is the AIDS that affects whores and junkies, the AIDS nobody likes to talk about except as medical or sociological statistics.

There is AIDS apartheid, and in this sharply funny, startling movie, a group of HIV-positive black queens form a guerrilla squad and start terrorising New York.

My second-best film on the festival is *Relax — It's Only Sex*, an elegant comedy drama that revolves around a straight woman, brilliantly played by Jennifer Tilley.

She is the "best friend" of a group of

queer men and women, who arrive and depart with new partners, old heartaches, unexpected joys and stark tragedies. While all this is happening, her own heterosexual relationship is taking strain because all her emotions seem to be invested in the gay people around her rather than in the straight man who loves her.

It is the only film I have ever seen that has taken an understanding look at a so-called "fag-hag", and it is excellently done and very entertaining.

For shock value there is nothing to match *Shooting Porn*, a racy, hilarious documentary about how gay male porno movies are made.

Famed porno director Chi Chi La Rue interviews some of the biggest (no pun intended) porn stars about how they prepare for their "roles" and how they manage to perform consistently.

It's outrageous, shocking and hilarious and gives a new meaning to the concept of "in your face" reporting. It is not for the faint-hearted, nor is *Hustler White*, a gay retelling of *Sunset Boulevard* set in the world of Hollywood's most dangerous street hustlers.

Pianese Nunzio is an impressive Italian film about a priest crusading against the Mafia in Naples. They dare not kill him and make a martyr of him, so they start demonising his relationship with a 14-year-old choirboy.

There are gay films from Africa, from Switzerland and Canada. There are seasons of intriguing short films that brim with creativity, and some that contain artful, academic deconstructions on the theory of gay politics.

The excellent selection is on at Cinema Nouveau in Johannesburg before moving to Cape Town and Durban.