



Cecil Williams

The Man Who Drove with Mandela by Greta Schiller
(England, USA, Netherlands, South Africa, 1998)

Mandela as contraband

THE MAN WHO DROVE WITH MANDELA is the portrait that director Greta Schiller made of the now deceased Cecil Williams. The white Englishman Williams was not only a famous theatre director and animated political activist, but also a homosexual. In the fifties - apartheid was still taken for granted - this caused him many problems in South Africa.

In 1928, Williams moved from Great Britain to Johannesburg to teach. After World War II, he joined the Springbok Legion, an antifascist organisation in which blacks and white were treated as equals.

One of Williams's most striking feats was the way he supported Nelson Mandela in the organisation of an armed rebellion against the apartheid regime. He smuggled the future president into

South Africa with an equally simple and brilliant disguise: Mandela posed as the driver of the rich, white theatre director. The deceit was revealed and Mandela was arrested; what happened to Williams is shown in the documentary.

Schiller alternately shows interviews with friends (including president Mandela himself), family and people from the theatre and the gay scene, and footage from newscasts, videos from gay circles and some monologues by actor Corin Redgrave, based on notes by Williams.

Images of the theatre man himself are lacking. Schiller: "We have searched for authentic material with Williams, but we only found one old recording of a radio play, in which he played a supporting part. We did not consider it

representative of him."

Apart from a portrait of a gifted, passionate and committed man, the documentary also provides an image of the underground political activities of the equally underground gay scene of South Africa in the fifties. It is remarkable that Williams - who returned to England when he was banished after his famed ride with Mandela - did not really worry about the possible consequences of his political activities. He was mainly anxious that he would be caught by the police when practising his homosexuality.

Schiller also links Williams's ties with Mandela to the fact that recently South Africa, as the first country in the world, explicitly laid down the protection of gays against discrimination in the constitution. (NS)