

Mandela's driver was red, gay and full of fun

Cecil Williams divided his life between his sexuality, politics and the theatre. That did not dilute his commitment, writes **Robert Greig**

Cecil Williams, my godfather, was a communist; and in an obituary I made the mistake of calling him by an affectionate family name: "a boy-scout communist". This elicited, rightly, an angry letter from his brother, Bill, insisting that Cecil was deeply committed and there was nothing amateurish about him.

True: but he wore his communism lightly and strongly: compare him with the prune-mouthed apparatchiks in the *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, uneasily insisting that they didn't mind that he was a "homosexual". Yet it was impossible to get out of my head a view of Cecil busily dropping copies of the *Daily Worker*, a British communist newspaper, around his lounge in London. "Huh?" I asked. "Oh, Ruth First is coming to tea," he explained airily.

Williams's communism seemed to have its roots in the anti-fascism of the thirties and in the fact that, for a long time, the Communist Party was the only mainly white party to align itself properly with the ANC. But Williams's commitment was worn unassumingly, buried in the man's gaiety. Williams was of course in the theatre and was theatrical. It is mistaken to assume that theatricality is devoid of sincerity: it is simply the shaping of sentiment and this is done with flair.

He lived multiple lives, this man who was chauffeuring Mandela when "the Black Pimpernel" was captured after two years on the run.

He is credited (by Judge Albie Sachs in the film) with helping to pave the way to the ANC's gay-friendly policy.

The same policy in law makes South Africa probably the most liberal country in the world. The impact of that goes wider than gay people feeling comfortable: it helps unleash great energy.

Williams was gay, a theatre director and an activist. He tended to divide the three; the habit of concealment of being gay, which rendered him particularly sensitive to police surveillance then, was not an issue with his close friends. He was a homosexual, that was it: no big deal.

Coming out, at that time and in that society, was neither known of nor necessary: a set of tacit acknowledgements dealt with it.

As a theatre director, his activism filtered through. He was probably the only white theatre director then who cast black and white people in the same plays. He went through the bizarre contortions of finding venues that could host mixed casts legally and in the process probably jeopardised his theatrical reputation: it took him out of the white mainstream. For Cecil, mixed casts were simply moral - to stage segregated plays for segregated audiences would have been unimaginable.

His activism was known, discreetly, to those not directly involved in the struggle. He was a founder of the Springbok Legion, a body set up, like the Torch Commando, of ex-servicemen, to get rid of the National-

ists. The Torch Commando, on the brink of taking up arms against the Nationalists, a step which, if successful, might have shortened the pain of this country, was sold out by Sir De Villiers Graaff, later leader of the United Party.

Cecil was one of hundreds jailed in the Johannesburg Fort during the state of emergency. As Mark Gevisser notes, Cecil emerged invigorated by the experience. He had had him a captive audience for the plays he staged: every director's dream. He carried on living a multilayered life, part of the partygoing set of Johannesburg in the fifties, directing plays and being functional in the struggle.

The achievement of *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* is that, notably, of many gay films. It explores and confronts history, bringing facts and qualities to the light. It does this with humanity and, I feel, a good deal of historical respect. There is little attempt in this film to impose a movie cliché or current morality or style of the past.

The archival pictures of people and places conjure up precisely the atmosphere of heroism and danger in that circle at that time. The research is detailed: not just facts, but the nuances of feelings of theatre people like Corney Mabaso's experience of Cecil Williams. Which has comic elements.

There are slips, obviously: the director, Greta Schiller, has Williams (played by Corin Redgrave) delivering a "courageous" monologue



Gay blade Williams: for an activist rooted in the anti-fascist movement of the thirties, 'coming out' was never an option in postwar South Africa

about his banning to the responsible minister who, it seems is hanging invisibly in the air. An awkward cliché. To have had Williams played by a Redgrave is a technical solution to a problem but is mixes fictional and documentary conventions untidily. Redgrave is nearly like Cecil was: a little bulkier and more in-

tense, less of the original's ready generosity of emotions. And I was not entirely sure of an ending that was Cecil's leaving South Africa.

It seemed to reflect a peculiarly South African view that life ends when we leave this country. The man was by no means unhappy elsewhere, nor was his life any kind of

anticlimax. It could never, given the personality have been.

● *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* will be screened at the Gay and Lesbian film festival in Pretoria on Thursday at 6pm; in Johannesburg on Saturday at 7.30pm; and in Cape Town on November 14 at 7pm. The

festival opens in Johannesburg tonight at the Cinema Nouveau and Cinema Africa and runs until November 2. In Pretoria, it runs till November 5 at the Tramshed Ster-Kinokor cinemas; and in Cape Town, from November 5 to 15, at Cinema Nouveau, Clarendon, and the Barry theatre at the South African Museum