

# QUITE

## Driving Miss Daisy

Gay liberation in South Africa owes a lot to a man most of us have never heard of. A new movie, *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, documents the extraordinary life of Cecil Williams. **Deleen Wilson** checked it out.



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South Africa's first feature-length movie on a gay subject. *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*

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South Africa's first feature-length movie on a gay subject, *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, chronicles the many lives of Cecil Williams, who is widely acknowledged by those who were involved at the time as being the first person to introduce the issue of gay equality into the South Africa liberation struggle.

In the movie Justice Albie Sachs says, 'if you want to understand why the ANC took such a progressive, open stand on the question of gay rights, you've just got to go back to Cecil. He was a living example of a freedom fighter who happened to

be gay, and he brought something special into the movement. He raised our consciousness in relation to these questions. By his life, by who he was.'

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An illustrious and grand theatre director who cut a dash in South Africa's glamorous cultural and social circles of the 1950s, Williams was a perfect comrade for the Communist Party. He was often used as a driver or courier, playing the role of an essential foot soldier rather than a glamorous leader.

Williams was frequently arrested, detained and even banned. But it was around the time of Mandela's arrest, when Williams was 55, that he began to question his life and what he had achieved. While under house arrest, unable to bear the thought of ongoing confinement in his flat on the 16th floor of the Ansteys Building, one of Johannesburg's most sought-after addresses, he escaped to London, where he died in 1979.

Ironically, the discrimination against homosexuality mirrored that against blacks, and certainly must have lent some impetus to his becoming a freedom fighter. These two subterranean identities both required layers of deceit. The film focuses on how Williams balanced those identities without trying to make a hero out of him. 'Rather than seeing him as the initiator of a simple domino effect, I am much more interested in the way ideas circulate, almost peripherally,' says political and cultural journalist Mark Gevisser, who researched and wrote the movie, based on Williams's own writings.

Gevisser learnt about Williams when meeting with Sachs in order to get his comment on the first gay and lesbian Pride Parade in 1990, which Gevisser was instrumental in organising. Sachs told Gevisser that he was dedicating the parade to the memory of Comrade Cecil Williams, of whom Gevisser had never heard before. And so the fascination began.

The movie was directed by Greta Schiller, the Emmy award-winning historical documentarian of *Before Stonewall* and *Paris Was a Woman*.

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*The Man Who Drove With Mandela* is a documentary, collated with a wide array of interviews with people who knew Williams, newspaper clippings, archival material and old home movies. Fictional inserts give Williams a voice. 'He was a theatre person,' says Gevisser, 'what better way to do this than to have an actor perform his words in a stage setting? This technique also conveys that this isn't real life or real time, and that this is simply our interpretation of Cecil, so I deliberately wanted to make it quite artificial.'

These monologues are performed in a very theatrical way by the brilliantly-cast English stage actor Corin Redgrave, whose film work includes *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *In the Name of the Father*. More recently, he and his sister Vanessa found a never-before-produced Tennessee Williams play entitled *Not About Nightingales*, in which he starred and which was a great success at the British National Theatre in England.

Cecil Williams was the son of a Cornish blacksmith and emigrated to South Africa from England in 1928. He was a much-loved schoolmaster at King Edwards, a radio personality, a lieutenant in WWII, a founder of the radical and anti-fascist group, The Springbok Legion, that accepted blacks as equals, and a central figure in the SA Communist Party and the Congress of Democrats.

In one of Williams's monologues in the movie, he says he was always worried that the police would catch him, 'not in some communist activity, but somehow or other on the homosexuality. Of course, it would be particularly dangerous to be caught with a black man. So I somewhat managed to stay away from that.'

Today, South Africa is the first country in the world to give constitutional equality to homosexuals. 'However,' says Jonathon of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, 'there is still a big gap between the law and social attitudes. But the constitutional changes have given us the courage to come out and take hold of our rights, which is why one of our primary concerns is ensuring that our



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PHOTOGRAPHS: ADAM WELTZ FOR SUNDAY LIFE

members know about, and have access to, the law'.

Looking at the Coalition's address, it is just as I expect, located in a seedier part of town preferred by the poor, the alternatives and the downright strange. I draw my preconceived conclusions and graphically imagine the walls plastered with out-to-shock, in-your-face colour posters of penises and Stephen Cohen-lookalikes sucking face at tragically farcical same-sex weddings. Of women looking like men and men looking like Barbie dolls, of scathing looks and hostile attitudes.

Instead, I could have walked into a doctor's surgery,

**Above** Shield for Zulu warriors for all-day protection – gay pride in the '90s, thanks to Cecil Williams. **Right** After a hard day's picketing, a nice cool drink goes down well. **Opposite page Top right** Comrade Cecil Williams. **Bottom left** Cecil spell-checks his billboard, and kicks himself for not ordering Windows '98. **Inset** Mark Gevisser, writer and director of *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*.

minus the coffee table with well-thumbed *Cosmopolitans*, of course. Bare, bland walls and a glass-fronted reception desk screamed normality and threw my bigotry right back in my face with a loud slap.

But while labour has a very good framework in equal rights, the area of family law – especially marriage and adoption – are still highly discriminatory. A gay or lesbian individual can adopt a child as a single person, but couples may not adopt. The age of consent is also different, being 19 for homosexuals as opposed to 16 for heterosexuals.

Yet had Cecil Williams been alive today, Gevisser believes he may not have taken part in the Pride Parade and some people think he would have hated his movie. 'He was of that generation of gay men who don't believe in being public,' says Gevisser. When Williams's nephew, Derek Gowlett, came out and told his friends and family, his uncle responded, 'Why don't you take out an advert in the Sunday Times?' But others feel he would have loved it. Just before he died

he was said to have told some youngsters that he was jealous of them living in an era of gay liberation.

While the movie is about the life of a homosexual man, Gevisser hopes that it will be of interest to a wide cross-section of people and not simply live in the gay subculture. 'Look how complicated and interesting and interwoven our history is,' he says. 'Not a rainbow but a tapestry, with lots of different coloured threads. We are pulling out one thread and looking at it on its own and also how it combines with all the other threads to make that tapestry. This movie is for all South Africans who make up its tapestry.' ☺

*The Man Who Drove With Mandela* will be screened as part of the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, at the Tramshed in Pretoria on Thursday 5 November at 6pm, at Cinema Nouveau in Rosebank, Johannesburg on Saturday 7 November at 7.30pm, and at Cinema Nouveau in Claremont, Cape Town, on Saturday 14 November at 7pm.

a rogue independent