

Schiller's Mandela strikes an idealist balance

THE MAN WHO DROVE WITH MANDELA

A documentary by Greta Schiller, featuring Corin Redgrave.
Not rated. 82 min. ★★★

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After directing such documentaries as *Before Stonewall* and *Paris Was a Woman*, you could say Greta Schiller is one of the leading gay film-makers of her time.

But pushing Schiller into that rainbow-painted pigeonhole, no matter how flattering the intention might be, really wouldn't be fair to this American director, who has made a career out of excavating the unmarked remains of gay history — especially in light of her most recent piece, *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*.

Ostensibly focused on the life of Cecil Williams, a white, anti-apartheid activist who also happened to be a homosexual, the film has gay content and an unmistakably partisan point of view.

However, it's not just a gay movie. It's a movie about our continuing, universal struggle to give every human being on the planet basic rights and freedoms.

A man of material wealth and position, Williams wouldn't, at first glance, appear to be the perfect poster boy for the oppressed, but that's precisely what makes *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* so fascinating — everything we see is entirely unexpected.

Whether it's the firsthand footage with Mandela himself, the scratched-up images of Johannesburg's flamboyant gay nightlife, Corin Redgrave's dramatic readings of Williams' own words or the talking-head testimonials from gay black men who risked life and limb to pursue their sexual orientation, Schiller finds great emotional texture in extraneous details.

Using Williams' story as the foundation, Schiller discovers added depth — not to mention some of film's most engaging moments — by giving us the bigger picture, finally explaining why

South Africa was one of the first countries on earth to legislate equal rights for homosexuals.

Beginning the film with Williams' ingenious ruse that allowed him and Mandela to criss-cross townships and police lines to sow the seeds of revolution — Mandela posed as Williams' chauffeur — Schiller goes on to interview the first wave of protesters who learned from Williams "how to resist" and "how to stop apologizing."

Eventually, Schiller constructs nothing less than an entire "how to" manual on how to become an autonomous, self-realized human being in the shadow of systematic, state-sanctioned, violent oppression.

At times, the film's earnest desire to proselytize to its audience looms so large that it overshadows its own obvious message. But for the most part, Schiller achieves a nice balance between solid storytelling, historical accuracy and life-altering idealism.

At the Pacific Cinémathèque.