

That Nelson Mandela had me in the back of his cab once

The week's film releases

by Philip French

The Man Who Drove With Mandela (83 mins, no cert) Directed by Greta Schiller; starring Corin Redgrave

The Inheritors (95 mins, 15) Directed by Stefan Ruzowitzky; starring Simon Schwarz, Lars Rudolph, Sophie Rois

Captain Jack (100 mins, PG) Directed by Robert Young; starring Bob Hoskins, Anna Massey, Gemma Jones, Patrick Malahide

My Favourite Martian (93 mins, PG) Directed by Daniel Petrie; starring Jeff Daniels, Christopher Lloyd, Liz Hurley, Daryl Hannah

The King and I (89 mins, U) Directed by Richard Rich; featuring the voices of Miranda Richardson, Martin Vidnovic, Ian Richardson

BY SOME WAY, the most significant film this week is Greta Schiller's **The Man Who Drove With Mandela**, a documentary that's being given a week at the ICA before touring various regional film theatres and ending up on television. It's a portrait of a fascinating Englishman, Cecil Williams, an unsung hero of the fight against apartheid and other injustices.

The picture begins with Nelson Mandela visiting the site of his arrest near Pietermaritzburg in 1962 when, disguised as Williams's chauffeur,

he was driving around South Africa organising anti-government activities for the ANC. After this striking opening, the film uses archive footage and new interview material to tell the story of Williams's extraordinary life, which comes across as a collaboration between Noël Coward and Nadine Gordimer.

Born in Cornwall in 1906 into a lower-middle-class family, he became aware of his homosexuality as a teenager, and in 1928 emigrated to South Africa. According to his former pupils, he was an inspiring teacher at King Edward's public school in Johannesburg, but it was the experience of the Second World War that transformed him. He returned from serving as a leading war correspondent for South African radio, covering the Mediterranean area, to help create the liberal, multi-racial Springbok Party and to enter the theatre as actor and director.

This tall, handsome, aristocratic dandy became a leading figure in radical and artistic circles at a time when gays and blacks were being persecuted, and he always referred to the police as 'Priscilla'. According to one contributor, Johannesburg after the Second World War was 'the most cosmopolitan city south of the Equator' and the guests at Williams's elegant apartment ranged from

'My Favourite Martian stars Christopher Lloyd as an alien with a talking shirt'

the Mandelas, Walter Sisulu and Albie Sachs to the Oliviers and Danny Kaye. Williams treated everyone as equals and the ANC's stance on gay rights stems from Williams's influence. Following the detention of Mandela, Williams was under house arrest. Anticipating that he might be charged with treason and his homosexuality used as a weapon against comrades, he sought the help of an old friend, the chief of railway police, to flee the country. A condition of the assistance was that he never participate in politics again.

He settled with his partner in London and died there in 1979. His story is sad and inspiring, and Greta Schiller's film brings the man and his times vividly to life. I am not entirely happy with the decision to punctuate the movie with monologues derived from Williams's writings and performed by Redgrave in a manner that clashes stylistically with the unscripted testimony of the man's friends. It creates the impression of a documentary being uneasily yoked to a one-man stage show.

7 ARTS FILM
The Observer Review 30 May 1999