

THE MAN WHO DROVE WITH MANDELA

(DOCU - BRITISH)

A Jezebel Prods. production, in association with Beulah Films. Produced by Greta Schiller, Mark Gevisser, Simon Allen. Executive producer, Indra de Lanerolle.

Directed by Greta Schiller. Writer, Mark Gevisser. Camera (color), Michelle Crenshaw, Tania Hoser; editor, Prisca Swan; music, Philip Miller; production designer, Sheba Phourbeah; sound (Dolby), Gita Cerveira, Maggie Ellis. Reviewed at Edinburgh Film Festival (Imagining Reality), Aug. 28, 1998. Running time: 80 MIN.

With: Corin Redgrave.

By DEREK ELLEY

The Man Who Drove With Mandela" takes a "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" type of approach to one of the 20th century's most charged struggles, South African apartheid, via a portrait of a gay legit-director and political activist, Cecil Williams. The result is an engrossing, smoothly put together chronicle of a forgotten hero's personal and political bravery that should appeal across the board, not simply to the gay enclave.

Williams arrived from England in colonial Johannesburg in 1928 and immediately "brought a breath of fresh air," per one former pupil, to a stuffy private school where he taught. Like many Brits who bloom in foreign locales, Williams clearly relished the change of scene, but it was the experience of WWII that definitively changed his personality as he came to terms with his homosexuality. He subsequently joined the Springbok Legion, a postwar, early anti-fascist group that accepted blacks as equals.

Johannesburg of the late '40s and '50s was a freewheeling playground ("the Manhattan of Africa"), with a privileged white society and a rich social and artistic life in which Williams thrived as a theatrical producer. He helped to raise the ANC's consciousness simply by being high-profile and gay — a freedom fighter in the broadest sense. "He taught me how to be articulate," says one black actress. "He taught us to be assertive."

By the end of the '50s, however, the backlash started, with middle-class whites imprisoned for their beliefs, including Williams. After being released, he helped smuggle Nelson Mandela back into South Africa, posing as his chauffeur; both were arrested, though Williams was set free the next day. It was then, at age 55, that he first entertained doubts about his life and achievements, finally disappearing from the country while under house arrest. Williams died in London in 1979.

Using interviews with survivors, newspaper clippings and home movies, director Greta Schiller (whose last docu was "Paris Is a Woman," a study of gay artists in the city during the '30s) paints an intriguing portrait of an unconventional, brave but slightly sad, old-style-liberal Brit, who was more fearful of being caught by the police as a practicing homosexual than as a political activist.

Unfortunately, we never hear Williams' own voice; instead, in staged inserts, Corin Redgrave gives voice to Williams' thoughts, as gathered by writer Mark Gevisser from the man's letters and other writings. It's a clever fit, endowing Williams with a certain dignity and allowing a concise expression of his inner desires and demons, though the absence of his actual voice gives the docu a certain remoteness. Tech credits are uniformly good.