



38<sup>th</sup> SEASON

## ENGLISH FILM CLUB 2017/18

Locarno, Cinema Kursaal

18:15

Friday, 2 March 2018

**A UNITED KINGDOM 2016**

111 minutes

Directed by **Amma Asante**

Starring: David Oyelowo, Rosamund Pike and Tom Felton

The film is based on the true story of the heir to the throne of Bechuanaland, Seretse Khama of the Bamangwato tribe, a young man in London in 1947 studying law. There he meets a white woman, Ruth Williams, whom he eventually marries, despite the protests of both their families and opposition from the British government, which is concerned about relations with South Africa and the stability of the entire region of Southern Africa.

Seretse is in fact a prince of Bechuanaland (now Botswana), a British protectorate which effectively submits to imperial rule – via a native tribal council – in return for security and stability. But while in London, Seretse falls for Ruth Williams, a gawky, lonely young office clerk. They get married and return in marital triumph to his homeland – to the horror of the people of Bechuanaland, who are suspicious of a haughty and snobbish white queen. The marriage leads to rupture with Seretse's uncle, Tshekedi Khama, who has been regent since Seretse was a child. Her Majesty's government are terrified that South Africa will take this marriage as a provocative affront and leftist incitement on its doorstep and could possibly retaliate by leaving the Commonwealth and depriving Britain of its gold and strategic minerals.

Seretse discovers that the British have allowed a US mining corporation to prospect for precious stones, and is eager to make sure that, if anything is found, the exploitation of the country's resources should solely be done by the people of Bechuanaland. Seretse wants his people to support him as king and manages to win their backing, while the British government decides to exile him from his own country.

Meanwhile, Ruth has their baby in Bechuanaland and becomes accepted by the local people by "walking the road with them". When the British want to proclaim an administrator to the Bechuana people instead of their king, the tribe refuses to convoke a meeting to do so. During this time, diamonds are found and Seretse makes sure that the British government publicly declares that the Bechuana people have the sole right to exploit these resources.

Churchill promises, if elected, to lift the exile on Seretse; however, after his victory in the general election Churchill turns the five-year ban into a lifelong one. In London, however, powerful people start supporting Seretse's claim, and he also receives support from the US government. Meanwhile, Apartheid develops in South Africa and begins to overshadow Bechuanaland as well.

### Critics' comments:

- Maybe any biopic risks naïveté in suggesting the agony of post-war Africa and this can be soothed by a love story about a handsome prince. But this movie has candour, heartfelt self-belief, and an unfashionable conviction that love conquers all, though not immediately.

(from *The Guardian*)

- This is also a very polite film. When, in a moment of frustration, Seretse swipes his arm across his desktop, knocking papers off it, Ms. Asante cuts before a single sheet, or any other object, hits the floor. For all that, the movie depicts the appalling political gamesmanship that conspires to keep Seretse and Ruth apart with consistent clarity. And while her filmmaking style can sometimes come across as grave, her sense of pace is always acute.

Seretse Khama is a character of wisdom and nobility — on introduction, practically his first words are "I see an Africa that's about unity, inclusion and equality." But Mr. Oyelowo, who is one of the best actors working today onstage or onscreen, instils his portrayal of Seretse with a disarming delicacy and vulnerability that make the strengths he is later forced to show all the more convincing. It is a remarkable, genuinely riveting work.

(from *The New York Times*, adapted)