



UK, 2016, 111 MINUTES, COLOUR

David Oyelowo, Rosamund Pike, Jack Davenport, Tom Felton.

Directed by Amma Asante.

No, not the United Kingdom, though its government and colonial officials play a significant role in this story. Rather, this is the story of a kingdom in southern Africa, Bechuanaland, and a crisis, beginning in 1947 that ultimately led to the establishing of the independent country, Botswana.

This is a true story, one that many audiences may not be familiar with at all, but well worth learning about.

Bechuanaland had a centuries-old tradition of a monarchy and succession. At this time, there was a regent, an uncle ruling for his nephew, Seretse Khama, who was studying in England in preparation for his destiny. Before his return he met a young woman, Ruth Williams, daughter of a salesman, to whom he was attracted, to whom he proposed – and was accepted. Accepted is not exactly the word that describes the reaction of her father nor of the reaction of Seretse's uncle and the immediate response of the people of Bechuanaland.

Before the marriage, Lord Alastair Canning, governor of southern Africa, confronts Ruth at the office in her typist pool, threatening her that she will bring down the British Empire. She defies him. The couple are married and travel to Seretse's home country. At the meeting of the tribe, his uncle denounces him, demands that he divorce his wife in order to become ruler.

While, initially, Seretse and Ruth think that they might have underestimated the situation, they stand firm, Seretse making a fine and rousing speech which overcomes some of the opposition from the people and he is accepted, to Lord Canning's disgust.

The drama continues at a personal level, Ruth spurned by Seretse's uncle's wife as well as by his sister – though his sister begins to relent as she sees Ruth becoming part of the community.

But the drama also continues at a political level, the British government demanding that Seretse return to England, suggesting that he take a diplomatic post in the Bahamas for five years and, when he declines, planning to exile him from his home. In the meantime, Ruth gives birth, communicating with her husband by phone. There is a movement in England to support Seretse, even an appeal to Prime Minister Attlee – with the revelation that Britain is concerned about South African support, finances, anti-Communist stances, rather than a small kingdom which is openly defying apartheid.

Winston Churchill does not come out of the story too well, having promised the King's return were he to be elected in 1948 – but reneging on the promise.

The years in exile in Britain are long, Ruth joining her husband with their daughter, her father being reconciled, but little prospect of returning home.

Some political shrewdness is exercised, especially by the British government, unwarily agreeing that Bechuanaland should have control over any mineral discoveries (while companies from South Africa were digging into Bechuanaland), and it is possible for the couple to return – with information given during the credits of the independence of the country, becoming Botswana in 1966, Seretse, advocating democracy rather than monarchy, as the president and the subsequent history of the

country, with photos of the actual protagonists during the credits.

The film was directed by Amma Asante who made the striking film about racial issues in 18th century Britain, *Belle*. This is one of those very well-made British films, well acted by David Oyelowo as a Seretse Khama, Rosamund Pike as Ruth Williams and Jack Davenport as Lord Canning - and always interesting at the personal and political levels.

Fr Peter Malone MSC

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