

GOODBYE BAFANA

UK/Belgium/France/South Africa, 2007, d. Bille August



Another welcome opportunity to look back at the history of South Africa and apartheid and to try to understand what happened. It also offers the opportunity to see Nelson Mandela during the time of his imprisonment and a glimpse of his personality and stature.

James Gregory was a young policeman from the Transkei when he was appointed to Robben Island in 1968. Although he had grown up on a farm and had a black friend, the Bafana of the title, he had absorbed the apartheid mentality and its racial prejudices as well as the fear of ANC terrorist activity. Because he spoke Xhosa, he was put in charge of Nelson Mandela and to spy on him. He was also in charge of censoring all mail on the island and of sitting in on the six-monthly visits from family.



Over a twenty year period, he got to know Mandela better and as a person, read something of the ANC freedom charter (which was officially banned) and began to appreciate his prisoner more and more.

When world opinion and movements within South Africa led to the government exercising a greater PR moderation at the end of the 1980s and Mandela was moved to a more comfortable internment (not that Robben Island, as we see in the detail of the film, was comfortable at all), Gregory was asked to be there. He finally prepared for Mandela's release, after 27 years, on February 11th, 1990.

This is a film about Nelson Mandela but he is not the central character. This is James Gregory's story based on his book. It is a look at the times and the characters from a white South African point of view and a way into this period for a non-African audience, something parallel to Cry Freedom and Steve Biko's story via editor Donald Woods.

Visitors to Robben Island now are taken around the sites by former prisoners. Their commentary is full of healing and forgiveness, the fruit of a mentality of truth and reconciliation which was fostered by the Committee and its hearings from the mid-1990s.

Dennis Haysbert, best known for his role as the US president in the series 24, brings strong presence to his interpretation of Nelson Mandela. How Mandela kept his composure, grace and sanity through his almost three decade internment is an example to us all – ratified by his election as president of the country in 1994 and his subsequent presence on the world stage.

The burden of the drama rests with Joseph Fiennes who gives one of his best performances. Usually somewhat buttoned up in his roles, Fiennes shows a far wider range than usual and takes us on James Gregory's intellectual and emotional journey from prejudice to understanding, respect and compassion. He begins as something of a zealot, throwing his authoritarian weight around. He gives information to Pretoria that seems to lead to deaths including that of Mandela's son in a car accident. He warms to Winnie Mandela and gives her some chocolate which causes more than ripples in the politics and press of the time. He begins to question, to ask Mandela about issues, to read and to see through the stances of the apartheid regime.

Interestingly, the screenplay puts the prejudiced views into the mouth of Gregory's wife (Diane Kruger) who takes the status quo for granted, fears black terrorism and believes that apartheid is part of God's plan where all are not equal and different 'kinds' should not mix. Despite her husband's long contact with Mandela and Mandela's help with her son and his studies, before his release, she had never set eyes on him.

The film was directed by the Oscar-winning Danish director Bille August (Pelle the Conqueror, Best Intentions and Les Misérables).