



**T A P E PRESENTS: BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?**

# Burning an Illusion

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Menelik Shabazz, director of films including *Blood Ah Go Run* (1981), *Burning an Illusion* (1982), *Catch a Fire* (1996) and *The Story of Lover's Rock* (2011) died this week from complications related to diabetes. He was in Zimbabwe, working on a new film, at the time of his death.

Shabazz's work is vital to British film culture and holds a personal significance for T A P E Collective. When we included *Burning an Illusion* in the season, Nellie Alston shared: 'This film more than any other has made me feel like I understood my mother's generation from their struggles to their joys.'

In a feature for *Monthly Film Bulletin* in 1989, Shabazz talked beautifully about his work and his vision for the cinema: 'Film unifies most of the art forms. In fact, all the art forms can fit into film. The paintings serve as a summing up. I think that helps, especially in places where people don't speak English... the image helps to encapsulate what has gone before. I'm very impressed when I go to a place like Burkina Faso, which is one of the poorest countries in the world, and they have a major film festival. I've never seen queues so long. African cinema has a lot to offer, but it's suffering from problems of finance and lack of continuity. Souleymane Cisse has shown that African cinema is continually evolving and reaching new heights.'

**Sight & Sound, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 2 July 2021**

Three decades after it was made, why does Menelik Shabazz's first feature, a simple tale of a young girl's relationship, hold such attention? Firstly, because it foregrounds the experience of a young black British woman, breaking with the tradition of placing white males at the centre of a story. Even today, that is highly unusual. Secondly, it focuses on her life as a young woman, not as a symbol of black experience.

Pat, an ordinary working-class London girl, has a caring family, a job she enjoys and her own flat. Like all drama, the film is about characters facing conflicts. But unlike most dramas about black people up till then, for most of the story it dramatises personal conflicts, not socio-economic or political ones. Pat's goal is to settle down. The most radical thing about *Burning an Illusion* is that it's about black people who aren't radical. It's about a male-female relationship.

Shabazz neatly avoids trapping his main characters inside the bubbles ('victim'/'noble savage') that suffocate most black figures in movies. This is the third reason for the film's longevity: designed as fallible people, his characters can breathe and grow. For the first 40 minutes we're in a love story. We see the courtship between Pat and her suitor, Del, culminating when he moves in. Then Pat's 'mister right' turns wrong.

The second half of the film dramatises how social forces and character traits work to derail Pat's goal, the breakdown of their relationship and how she and Del react to the pressures they face. When they become politicised by the end of the film they've changed because of the experiences the plot has taken them through. We're shown how and why they change.

The final reason why the film still grips is that, even now, nothing else quite like it has been made.

**Ade Solanke, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)**

## A contemporary review

In all the major film-producing countries – assuming that Britain is one – films about the black experience are minority films. As such, they tend to come in three varieties. Blaxploitation films like *Superfly* and *Cleopatra Jones*, which celebrate a ghetto situation without really questioning it. The British market has never been able to support these. Liberal conscience pictures in the Stanley Kramer mould. We haven't bothered much with them either.

And independent features made by and about black people. There, there are signs of life in Britain, of which *Burning an Illusion* is the most recent as well as potentially the most interesting and the most problematic. One of the ways in which it is problematic is that, because it looks like getting wider distribution than *Pressure*, *Blacks Britannica* or *Babylon*, it necessarily strays into the wider (liberal) arena.

Liberal films belong in the wider arena. They demand guilt – a comfortable, nonspecific guilt which can be equally comfortably assuaged by allowing the (white) audience to identify with the (black) underdog, and take pleasure in him/her beating the system. It's called having your cake and eating it, and it makes for a great night out. Menelik Shabazz doesn't play that game, though he does flirt with it. *Burning an Illusion* has most of the hallmarks of militant cinema. Del (Victor Romero) is jailed for slashing a policeman in circumstances which are, from his (and therefore our) point of view, highly ambiguous. At the very least, he is provoked. In prison, he embarks on a course of self-education, writing to his woman Pat (Cassie McFarlane) that 'black people have got to fight back'. Pat becomes politically active and the film ends with her on a bus, presumably on the way to a picket or a demo, celebrating her new consciousness and her black sisterhood with a clenched fist on which the frame freezes.

On the other hand, the devices which Shabazz uses to bring his audience to this point are, by comparison with the militant films of the 60s and early 70s, fairly traditional: a progression towards increased consciousness through a series of individual circumstances whose wider repercussions are not initially stressed, accompanied by a first-person voice over from Pat to guide us through the transitions. Shabazz is not really concerned with questioning the nature of cinematic representation. What he is concerned with is reaching the people the film is about (who may be affected by the nature of cinematic representation but are not fundamentally concerned with it), and he has apparently been very successful with screenings followed by discussions among London's black community. The film makes certain concessions to other audiences, notably by softening the West Indian patois in the dialogue scenes and removing it entirely from the voice over. But it is not really for another audience. Which is what makes reviewing it in that context problematic. To welcome the film is not enough. To comment on its suitability for its intended audience is, for a white middle-class reviewer, presumptuous.

With the proviso, then, that my opinion is handicapped, if not actually invalid – the film is about a black, working-class woman and I am a white middle-class man; even the pretensions of liberal empathy are limited – there are two things that are particularly impressive about *Burning an Illusion*. The first is that, like Horace Ové's *Pressure*, its militancy is gradually arrived at. Most of the film avoids the immediate impact drama of conflict with the systems of a white society, and concentrates instead on everyday problems which are primarily male/female and only secondarily black/white. Pat's aspirations are those of the world in which she has been brought up: an annual holiday; a new carpet for her neat, tower-block apartment; a colour TV. Del's are universally male. 'My dignity come first,' he tells Pat. 'Man must be free, you know ... Trouble with you, man, you're too possessive.' By which he means that Pat, having taken over the financial responsibility entirely when he is sacked, and having cooked his food for him, expects him not to go out every night with his friends, nor to assume she will bring them beer when they take over the apartment to play cards.

In the end, she throws him out. This in itself is a major breakthrough, not just for her but for the film. Instead of showing the problems of Britain’s black communities to be the result of directly negative intervention by white authorities (employers, teachers, police), *Burning an Illusion* treats a black relationship equally threatened by unconsciously adopted external attitudes (on Pat’s part) and traditional male West Indian attitudes (on Del’s). In other words, it focuses on ordinary life in the black community, rather than making that community an inevitable focus for crisis and drama.

But the last part of the film rather abandons this tack for the easier task of consciousness-raising through conflict (however inevitable that conflict may be). Pat’s assertion of her rights as a woman is partly channelled if not actually subverted into her being ‘part of the struggle for equal rights and liberation’. It is Del’s demand for books to read in jail that occasions this change. ‘What was funny,’ she says, ‘was that his interest in books was rubbing off on me.’ Why funny? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, having taken the lead in the struggle for equal sexual rights – not just in her own case, but in advising her friend Sonia not to allow herself to be pushed around by her man – she takes second place once again in the broader political struggle. That the lessons learned in the first part of the film are carried over into the second part is assumed rather than demonstrated. Is Pat black first and a woman second, or a woman first and black second? And do I have the right to ask that question, being neither? What is more, does it matter that I think the film is fine but flawed? The important thing is that it should work. And that it seems certain to do. It reflects an experience, burns an illusion and portrays a consciousness. That, in the context of its production and its potential distribution, is more than enough.

**Nick Roddick, *Sight & Sound*, Autumn 1982**

## But You’re Not Black

A Chinese-Caribbean-Canadian woman tries to embrace her parents’ Trinidadian identity.

**BUT YOU'RE NOT BLACK**

*Director:* Danielle Ayow  
Canada 2019  
19min

**BURNING AN ILLUSION**  
*Directed by:* Menelik Shabazz  
©: Menelik Shabazz  
*Production Company:* British Film Institute Production Board  
*Production Supervisor:* Vivien Pottersman  
*Production Assistant:* Matthew Burge  
*1st Assistant Directors:* Chris Rose, Mike Shoring  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Imruh Caesar  
*Continuity:* Caroline Sax  
*Written by:* Menelik Shabazz  
*Photography:* Roy Cornwall  
*Camera Assistant:* Steve Harrison  
*Electricians:* Bruce Kington, James Lennon  
*Graphic Designer:* Anum Iyapo  
*Editor:* Judy Seymour  
*Assistant Editor:* Rosalind Haber  
*Art Direction:* Miranda Melville  
*Assistant Art Direction:* Shakka Dedi  
*Wardrobe Assistant:* Jane Moss  
*Make-up Artist:* Audrey Foster  
*Hair Stylist:* Juliana Julien  
*Music:* Seyoum Netfa, Ras Angels  
*Sound:* Edward Tise  
*Assistant Sound Recordist:* Rosemary Straker  
*Additional Sound:* John Anderton  
*Dubbing Mixer:* Tony Anscombe  
*Fight Arranger:* Derek Ware  
*We would also like to thank:* Film Lighting Services, Nellie Frocks, Lady at Lord John, London Co-Operative Society, Omnibus Theatre, Grassroots Bookshop, West London Media Workshop

**Cast**

Cassie McFarlane (*Pat Williams*)  
Victor Romero (*Del Bennett*)  
Beverley Martin (*Sonia*)

Angela Wynter (*Cynthia*)  
Malcolm Fredericks (*Chamberlain*)  
Chris Tummings (*Scotty*)  
Larrington Walker (*Tony*)  
Trevor Laird (*pest*)  
Corinne Skinner-Carter (*Pat’s mother*)  
Janet Kay (*singer in club*)  
Marva Buchanan (*Lorna*)  
Millie Kiarie (*chairwoman*)  
Nicola Wright (*Christine*)  
Ruddy L. Davis (*father*)  
Suzanne Auguiste (*Angela*)  
Brian Bovell (*Nat West*)  
Basil Otoin (*first waiter*)  
Vinny (*second waiter*)  
Trevor Ward (*man in restaurant*)  
Stella Orakwue (*woman in restaurant*)  
Andrew De La Tour (*foreman*)  
Lynval Dunn (*Andy*)  
Errol Edmondson (*pool table youth*)  
The Government (*band in club*)  
Eunice Allen (*girl in club*)  
Junior Green (*man in club*)  
Ian Cullen (*desk sergeant*)  
Les Clark, Steve Kane, Brian Lintz, Gary McDonald, Derek Moss, Charles Pickess, Jeff Silk, Byron Sotiris, Doug Stark (*policemen*)  
John Cannon, Dean Garfield, Eric Kent, Angelo Papini, Terry Paris, Tony Powell (*prison warders*)  
Leroy Anderson (*Richard*)  
Loftus Burton (*solicitor*)  
Graham Rowe (*appeal judge*)  
Alan Cumnor-Price (*man with gun*)  
John Challis (*man in car*)  
Tim Condren (*kerb crawler*)  
Paula Sinclair (*girl in street*)  
Malcolm Davidson (*doctor*)  
Ras Angels, Ras Messengers (*singers and drummers in minibus*)

UK 1981©  
105 mins

T A P E PRESENTS: BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

Eyimofe (This Is My Desire)

Thu 1 Jul 20:30; Fri 9 Jul 17:40

Black Girl (La noire de...)

Sat 3 Jul 11:40; Mon 12 Jul 18:20

Burning an Illusion

Sat 3 Jul 14:20; Thu 8 Jul 17:45

While We Live (Medan vi lever)

Sat 3 Jul 17:30; Tue 20 Jul 20:30

Binti

Sun 4 Jul 18:20; Mon 19 Jul 20:40

Pinky

Sat 10 Jul 20:50; Sat 24 Jul 11:40

Head-On (Gegen die Wand)

Sun 11 Jul 18:30; Tue 27 Jul 20:40

The Namesake

Wed 14 Jul 17:40 (+ live spoken-word performance);

Wed 21 Jul 20:40

What Will People Say (Hva vil folk si)

Fri 16 Jul 20:30; Sat 31 Jul 17:30

In Conversation with Nikesh Shukla

Fri 23 Jul 18:20

Lilting

Sat 24 Jul 17:20; Fri 30 Jul 20:40

Shoot the Messenger + Q&A with director Ngozi Onwurah,

hosted by T A P E's Angela Moneke

Thu 29 Jul 17:45

Culture Shock: Short Film Programme + Q&A with UNDR LNDN

Fri 30 Jul 17:40

T A P E was founded in 2015 as a response to the lack of representation on screen. Find out more about this curatorial collective at [tapecollective.co.uk](http://tapecollective.co.uk)

THE CINEMA OF MÁRTA MÉSZÁROS

The Girl (Eltávozott nap)

Mon 5 Jul (preceded by ‘Introducing Márta Mészáros’ talk);

Fri 16 Jul 20:50

Binding Sentiments (Holdudvar)

Tue 6 Jul 20:50; Sat 17 Jul 15:20

Don’t Cry, Pretty Girls! (Szép lányok, ne sírjatok!)

Wed 7 Jul 17:40; Sun 18 Jul 18:40

Woman With a Movie Camera Presents: the World Restoration

Premiere of Riddance (Szabad lélegzet)

Sat 10 Jul 17:30 (+ pre-recorded extended intro by Márta Mészáros);

Wed 21 Jul 21:00

Adoption (Örökbefogadás)

Mon 12 Jul 18:00 (pre-recorded intro by Selina Robertson,

Club des Femmes); Thu 22 Jul 20:30

Nine Months (Kilenc hónap)

Tue 13 Jul 17:40; Sun 25 Jul 12:30

The Two of Them/Two Women (Ök ketten)

Wed 14 Jul 20:50; Mon 26 Jul 18:10

The Heiresses (Örökség)

Sun 18 Jul 15:20; Tue 27 Jul 20:30

Diary for My Children (Napló gyermekeimnek)

Sat 24 Jul 14:10 (+ pre-recorded extended intro by Márta Mészáros);

Wed 28 Jul 17:50

Diary for My Loves (Napló szerelmeimnek)

Sat 24 Jul 17:30; Sat 31 Jul 20:30

Diary for My Father and Mother (Napló apámnak, anyámnak)

Sat 24 Jul 20:45; Sat 31 Jul 14:40

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 5 Jul 18:00

African Odysseys Present: European Premiere:

The Milkmaid + Q&A with writer-director Desmond Ovbiagele

and producer Oluseun Sowemimo

Sat 10 Jul 14:00

Black Lens Festival Opening Night: UK Premiere:

How to Stop a Recurring Dream + Q&A with director Ed Morris

and actor Ruby Barker

Fri 16 Jul 18:00

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Girlfriends

Fri 16 Jul 18:15

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Projecting the Archive: Trottie True (aka The Gay Lady) + intro by BFI

Curator Josephine Botting

Tue 6 Jul 18:00

Silent Cinema: Nell Gwyn + intro by BFI Curator Bryony Dixon

Sun 18 Jul 15:30

Seniors’ Free Archive Matinee: Cabin in the Sky+ intro by writer

Marcus Powell

Mon 19 Jul 14:00

Experimenta: Born in Flames + discussion

Thu 22 Jul 18:00

Relaxed Screening (tbc)

Tue 27 Jul 18:00

Terror Vision: Children

WORLD OF WONG KAR WAI

As Tears Go By (Wong Gok ka moon)

Wed 7 Jul 14:30; Sat 17 Jul 20:30; Mon 19 Jul 20:45

Days of Being Wild (Ah Fei jing juen)

Thu 8 Jul 20:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by season programmer Ann Lee);

Mon 12 Jul 14:30; Mon 19 Jul 18:00

Fallen Angels (Do lok tin si)

Fri 9 Jul 20:50; Wed 14 Jul 14:30; Sun 25 Jul 18:30

Ashes of Time Redux (Dung che sai duk)

Sat 10 Jul 11:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by season programmer Ann Lee);

Wed 21 Jul 20:45; Fri 30 Jul 20:45

Chungking Express (Chung Hing sam lam)

Sat 10 Jul 18:15; Mon 12 Jul 20:50; Tue 20 Jul 20:45; Thu 29 Jul 14:30

Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Sun 11 Jul 15:40; Fri 16 Jul 14:30; Fri 23 Jul 18:10

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Wed 14 Jul 20:45; Sat 17 Jul 13:30; Wed 21 Jul 14:30; Thu 29 Jul 20:45

2046

Thu 15 Jul 20:20; Sat 17 Jul 16:10; Sat 31 Jul 14:30

The Grandmaster (Yi dai zong shi)

Tue 20 Jul 18:00; Thu 22 Jul 20:50; Mon 26 Jul 20:50

The Hand (Extended Cut)

Thu 22 Jul 18:30; Fri 30 Jul 18:20

My Blueberry Nights

Fri 23 Jul 20:50; Wed 28 Jul 20:40

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