



**EARL CAMERON**

# Flame in the Streets

*Flame in the Streets* originated in a stage play, *Hot Summer Night*, which Ted Willis wrote in 1958 and adapted for television the following year as part of ABC's Armchair Theatre, which also provided an outlet for playwrights like Harold Pinter, Clive Exton and Alun Owen. The plays were made with tiny budgets, used only two or three sets and were necessarily dependent on good scripts and acting. Willis' play fitted the format very well.

On a hot summer evening Jacko Palmer, a trade union official, returns to his humble home in Wapping, confronts a problem with his subordinates who are reluctant to endorse the promotion of a black man to a chargehand position, and then discovers that his only daughter, who has risen out of the working class to become a teacher, wants to marry a black man. Jacko is not very pleased but is loath to jettison his liberal principles. 'I can't support one man in the factory and bar another one from my own home,' he says, and he is prepared to go along with his daughter's decision. But for his wife Nell it is a more serious matter. Having fought against poverty and squalor all her life and endured an unsatisfactory marriage to a bullishly inconsiderate husband for the sake of her daughter, she is not prepared to see her end up 'in one room with a horde of black children.' Thus the race theme, though important, is subsumed under general family crisis.

Early in the play Jacko's old dad tells him, 'You don't convince people, you 'oller at them until they give in for the sake of a bit of peace.' When people start to 'oller back at him, his egocentric world is shattered. Sonny Lincoln, the black boyfriend, refuses to listen to Jacko because, he complains, he speaks to him as an inferior, unaware that Jacko acts in the same belligerent, domineering way with everybody. And Nell, desperate that she has sacrificed her life for nothing, turns on Jacko with the same furious hatred she has expressed for the blacks.

Instead of trying to reproduce the small-scale virtues of the television play, Baker and Willis work a thorough transformation. *Flame in the Streets* is shot in CinemaScope and Technicolor and the time and setting changed. The action takes place not on a hot summer night, but on 5 November, then – with bonfires on every other street corner – a great occasion for communal celebration. As in *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*, events reported in the play are shown in the film; but whereas in the Osborne/Richardson films this makes for an untidy mishmash of film and theatre, here the changes work to move a domestic drama into the social sphere. We see the squalid surroundings the blacks have to live in, and the relationship between the daughter, Kathie, and her black boyfriend is made to seem more exotic by the very fact that the film is made in colour.

As striking is the change effected by casting John Mills in place of John Slater as Jacko. Slater's Jacko is a modern, full-time union official whizzing from conference to negotiating table to television studio, his Wapping home merely a badge to prove his honorary membership of the working class. Mills is a craftsman, still at work in Notting Hill furniture factory, who fits his union activity into his spare time. Thus he is much more closely involved in the everyday politics of the workplace: he himself has to persuade the workers to

accept the black chargehand rather than delegating the task to his subordinates. He is more old-fashioned than Slater's Jacko and his bigotry and blindness more formidable and deeply rooted. This necessarily changes his relationship with his wife, and the changes are reinforced by the different emphases put on Nell's character by Ruth Dunning in the television version and Brenda de Banzie in the film. Ruth Dunning's Nell is a dignified working-class matron with a temper and a personality and a sexual relationship, albeit an unsatisfactory one, with her husband; she is the dominant force in *Hot Summer Night*, overwhelmingly sympathetic despite her racism. Brenda de Banzie (who played Archie Rice's long-suffering wife in *The Entertainer*) is something different. Several reviewers complained that Brenda de Banzie was too middle-class for the part, but anyone with experience of 50s working-class life will recognise that exaggerated refinement which some women used to adopt as a barrier against the surrounding squalor. (Annie Walker, one-time landlady of the pub in *Coronation Street*, is a later example.)

The collapse of her primness and formality into hysterical abuse in her attack on Kathie for wanting to sleep with a 'nigger' and on Jacko for taking her for granted speaks as much about sexual repression as it does about the harshness of working-class life, and the heightening of melodramatic tension in the home is paralleled by the introduction of leather-jacketed, motorbike-riding young hooligans, who push people around and almost succeed in burning Gomez, the black chargehand, on the bonfire. They are less real characters than folk devils, embodiments of everything which is worthless and evil (a gang of Teddy Boys in *Sapphire* perform the same function with less relevance to the plot). Here they act as an external catalyst, jolting Jacko into a realisation of where his true loyalties lie.

Like most of Willis' work, *Flame in the Streets* suffers from being pedantically well-meaning, but in contrast to the patrician aloofness of Dearden and Relph, Willis gets much closer to his working-class protagonists. Such characters as Jacko Palmer – a skilled craftsman in furniture factory and a strong unionist – appear much less frequently in British films than their lower middle-class equivalents like Bernard Miles' Mr Harris (a signwriter with his own small business) in *Sapphire*. As in *Sapphire*, the plot allows for an exploration of an 'unknown London' – the racially mixed area of Notting Hill – and an examination of the prejudice and sexual frustration lying beneath the civilised veneer of respectable white society. In this respect Jacko's family comes out of it rather better than the Harrises. Whereas David Harris is shamefacedly prepared to forgive and forget that the attractive white girl he loves has black blood, Kathie Palmer is fascinated by her black boyfriend's air of exoticism. She accepts her father's teachings at face value and sees no reason why other people's prejudices should come between her and the man she loves. Jacko is exposed less as a bigot than as a man who, living his life according to the union rule book, has lost his capacity for dealing with personal, emotional issues. (As his wily old dad – played by Wilfred Brambell – tells him, 'You can't put this on the agenda as "Any other business"'.')

Inevitably in the shift of emphasis from the particular to the general there is a heavier reliance on simplification and stereotyping, but this a price worth paying. In *Hot Summer Night*, where virtually all the action takes place in the Palmer home and the conflict is essential within the family, resolution comes through a simple act of realism and generosity. Jacko, his eyes opened to the needs and desires of his wife and daughter, makes amends for his past blindness by promising that he and Nell will move out of the poky little house

which his wife hate, thus leaving it empty for Kathie and her black husband. In *Flame in the Streets*, where issues and events are exposed more to the real world (the location shooting in Notting Hill and Alex Vetchinsky's superb detailed sets give a very solid sense of place), such a solution would be implausible; and matters are more ambiguously resolved with the two couples, battered by the emotional turmoil they have been through, making tentative efforts to find a common ground.

**Extracted from *Sixties British Cinema* by Robert Murphy (BFI Publishing, 1992)  
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#### FLAME IN THE STREETS

*Director:* Roy Baker  
*Production Company:* Rank Organisation Film Productions Ltd  
*In association with:* Somerset Productions  
*Executive Producer:* Earl St. John  
*Producer:* Roy Baker  
*Associate Producer:* Jack Hanbury  
*Production Manager:* Charles Orme  
*Assistant Director:* Stanley Hosgood  
*Continuity:* Penny Daniels  
*Screenplay based on his own story:* Ted Willis  
*Director of Photography:* Christopher Challis  
*Camera Operator:* David Harcourt  
*Editor:* Roger Cherrill  
*Art Director:* Alex Vetchinsky  
*Set Dresser:* Arthur Taksen  
*Costume Designer:* Yvonne Caffin  
*Make-up:* W.T. Partleton  
*Hairdresser:* Stella Rivers  
*Music:* Philip Green  
*Sound Recording:* Dudley Messenger,  
Gordon K. McCallum  
*Sound Editor:* Harry Miller

#### Cast

John Mills (*Jacko Palmer*)  
Sylvia Syms (*Kathie Palmer*)  
Brenda De Banzie (*Nell Palmer*)  
Earl Cameron (*Gabriel Gomez*)  
Johnny Sekka (*Peter Lincoln*)  
Ann Lynn (*Judy Gomez*)  
Wilfrid Brambell (*Mr Palmer Sr*)  
Meredith Edwards (*Harry Mitchell*)  
Newton Blick (*Visser*)  
Glyn Houston (*Hugh Davies*)  
Michael Wynne (*Les*)  
Dan Jackson (*Jubilee*)  
Cyril Chamberlain (*James Dowell*)  
Gretchen Franklin (*Mrs Bingham*)  
Harry Baird (*Billy*)  
Max Butterfield (*first lout*)  
Larry Martyn (*second corner boy*)  
Irvin Allen (*Christie*)  
Lionel Ngakane (*Sam*)\*  
Corinne Skinner (*Mrs Jackson*)\*  
William Ingram (*Gerry*)\*  
Brian McDermott (*Tim*)\*  
Bari Johnson (*Mickey*)\*  
Joan Jason (*second black girl*)\*  
Sonny McKenzie (*Mrs Jackson*)\*

UK 1961©  
93 mins

\* Uncredited

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##### BRITAIN'S FIRST BLACK SCREEN STAR

##### Celebrating Britain's First Black Screen Star

Sun 1 Aug 14:00

##### African Odysseys present: A Warm December

Sun 1 Aug 17:30 (+ intro by actor Esther Anderson); Wed 18 Aug 20:40

##### Pool of London

Mon 2 Aug 14:00 (+intro); Wed 25 Aug 20:50

##### Two Gentlemen Sharing

Fri 6 Aug 17:10 (+ intro by season curator Burt Caesar);

Mon 23 Aug 20:30

##### Flame in the Streets

Sun 8 Aug 15:00; Sat 28 Aug 17:10

##### Sapphire

Tue 10 Aug 20:20 (+ discussion); Sat 28 Aug 13:00

##### The Fear of Strangers (+ intro) + The Chocolate Tree

Sat 14 July 14:10

##### Thunder on Sycamore Street + discussion with Actor Ashley Walters

(schedule permitting) and playwright Stephen S Thompson)

Sat 14 Aug 17:30

#### Promotional partners



Season co-curated by actor-director Burt Caesar and the BFI's Marcus Prince and David Somerset.

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