



SMALL AXE

Mangrove

+ Q&A with director Steve McQueen and Small Axe Consultant Paul Gilroy

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

Speaking to *Sight & Sound* at the time of the release of *Widows* two years ago, Steve McQueen offered a refreshing challenge to the platitude that our current cultural moment is a TV golden age: 'Some of this new TV is so rubbish because they try to squeeze every drop and keep it going, even when the narrative has finished,' McQueen claimed. 'Moviemaking is about craft, about storytelling... It's the best form because there is a beginning, a middle and an end. Rather than stretching it out.'

With those remarks in mind, it may seem surprising to find McQueen turning to the small screen for his first post-*Widows* project. But *Small Axe*, a BBC and Amazon Studios-produced five-part anthology series exploring Black British experiences from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, is about as far removed as can be imagined from the excesses of the kind of TV that McQueen criticises. The scorching first episode, *Mangrove*, suggests that the series as a whole represents a return to the kind of distilled, focused storytelling and socially relevant themes that distinguished BBC's *Play for Today*.

That comparison resonates, since *Play for Today* debuted the same year that the pivotal event dramatised in McQueen's film took place: the Mangrove March of August 1970. The focus is on the trial of the 'Mangrove Nine', a group of West Indian activists charged with incitement to riot and affray after their protest against police racism ended in violent clashes. The trial at the Old Bailey, where two of the group chose to represent themselves, became a cause célèbre, resulting in the first judicial acknowledgement of racism in the British police force.

The subject matter (previously covered by a Horace Ové-produced, Franco Rosso-directed 1973 documentary) could scarcely be more timely. But like other recent films dealing with histories of community activism – Robin Campillo's widely praised *BPM* (2017), Mike Leigh's underrated *Peterloo* (2018) – *Mangrove* is all about immersing the viewer in its historical moment rather than hammering home aspects of contemporary relevance. In the case of McQueen's film, in particular, there's simply no need. Without any necessity to push, the film speaks directly to the context of Black Lives Matter – as well as referring the viewer back to one of the most polarising moments in *Widows*: the scene depicting the police shooting of a young biracial male character.

At over two hours, *Mangrove* is by far the longest of the episodes that make up *Small Axe*, and is very much a film of two halves.

The first half focuses on the Notting Hill community where the Trinidadian entrepreneur Frank Crichlow (Shaun Parkes) is opening his new Caribbean

restaurant, the Mangrove, which becomes a focal point for the Black community and a target of frequent, racially motivated police raids. With 'Powell for PM' graffiti glimpsed on the streets, McQueen and cinematographer Shabier Kirchner immerse us in the community in heartfelt, sensuous ways. When the characters are out, partying on the street, the camera is right there with them, a joyful participant, fluid and tactile, the music perfectly complementing the images. The camera is right in there, too, in the painful scenes of the raids, and in the central protest sequence – after which the film narrows down from a community portrait to the courtroom drama of Frank and his associates' trial.

The absence of several characters is felt in the second half but the courtroom scenes are handled with dexterity, bringing out the trial's intricacies clearly and dramatically, and with wily work from Alex Jennings as the judge, Samuel West as the prosecution counsel and Jack Lowden as the Nine's barrister. Though marred by moments of flat exposition, McQueen and Alastair Siddons's screenplay brings out the contrasting personalities of a group coming together in a shared cause.

Malachi Kirby brings vibrancy to Darcus Howe, whether weathering domestic strife or proving a theatrical presence in the courtroom as he quotes Shakespeare and ties Sam Spruell's rancid, scowling PC Pulley in knots. Moving from Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018) to real-life Black Panther, Letitia Wright conveys the intellectual precision and practical passion of Altheia Jones. At the centre, Shaun Parkes's piercing performance alerts us to every shade of frustration, anger, hope, and weariness that Frank feels.

Among the most important films of the year, and certainly one of its filmmaker's finest, *Mangrove* sets the bar high for the rest of *Small Axe* – a series which McQueen hopes to develop further to explore Black lives in other British cities. The possibilities of the project seem wonderfully wide. Both intimate and monumental, *Mangrove* itself ends on a deliberately low-key, contemplative note that makes memorable use of the Maytals' Pressure Drop and complicates any sense of triumph. Still, the film's urgent, intelligent portrait of collective activism and resistance lingers. Connecting us to the past, *Mangrove* enlightens and empowers us in the present.

Alex Ramon, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

Watching *Mangrove* felt like home. The sights, sounds, accents, history all radiated a sense of Blackness in Britain that is rarely displayed on a mainstream platform like the BBC. We are so accustomed to the daily diet of Whiteness that we crave and praise the slivers of representation that we are offered. But *Mangrove* did not hold back, or compromise in its story of Black life. It's hard to explain how refreshing it was to hear the range of Caribbean accents and the embrace of dialect that will sail far over the heads of many viewers. The soundtrack provided the perfect underscore for the experience.

The realities of police harassment and racism were fully on display. The sense of terror was palpable as each police raid brutally rained down on the Ladbroke Grove restaurant. 'Under siege' is the only way to describe how people of that generation saw the police presence, which felt like a colonial

force. It is disturbing that many a parallel will be drawn to experiences today. During the court proceedings, the blatant lies of the police officers were starkly and humorously drawn out. The lack of trust in the official version of events is something we have had to price in to how we react to cases involving the police. The irony of the concept of a 'criminal justice system' was on full display for the public to see.

Mangrove is the first time I have seen a genuine attempt to represent British Black Power on mainstream television. Darcus Howe and Althea Jones-LeCointe, who represented themselves in the trial, were leaders of the British Black Panther movement, and it should not have taken more than 50 years for part of that story to make it to the small screen.

There is a real attention to detail. We hear of C.L.R. James and his classic work on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. We also see *Black Dimensions*, a grassroots paper, being self-published on a mimeograph machine. The paper could have stood in for countless community publications like the *Abeng*, *Black Voice* and the *West Indian Gazette*, the first black newspaper, published by activist Claudia Jones. We also see the protests, the slogans and the spirit of resistance that is the first thing that comes to mind whenever I think of our presence in Britain. Not victims, not criminals, but as Darcus Howe put it 'protagonists' who shape our own history. The representation of Jones-LeCointe is a landmark because too rarely do we see the indispensable role of Black women in our histories of activism.

The courtroom scenes were especially symbolic, given that one of the untold impacts of British Black Power was to shake up institutions. We see a contempt for the pomp and ceremony of the Old Bailey, and the white men in wigs parading as justice. I've spent a lot of time in courtrooms, shadowing my dad who was a criminal defence solicitor, and it was invigorating to see the stale, pale format overturned. The crowded court gallery continually intruded with murmurs of disapproval, laughter and yells of encouragement, and shouts of 'liard!' and 'hallelujah' gave the proceedings the feel of a community meeting. The 'not guilty' verdict is shown to be a result of this subversion of the court system, forcing it to work on our terms and not conforming to the status quo.

My only fear is that the BBC will feel that it has fulfilled its requirement to cover Black power. *Mangrove* is a great starter to the history of black activism in Britain, but should leave us hungry for far more.

Kehinde Andrews, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

MANGROVE

Directed by: Steve McQueen
©: Small Axe Productions Ltd
a Turbine Studios *and* Lammas Park *production*
Supported by: Creative England
In association with: Amazon Studios, Emu Films, BBC Studios Distribution, Six Temple Productions
For: BBC, Amazon Studios
Presented by: BBC Film, BBC
Executive Producers: Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner, Steve McQueen
Executive Producer for Lipsync: Norman Merry
Executive Producer for BBC Studios Distribution: Caroline Stone
Executive Producer for BBC: Lucy Richer
Executive Producer for BBC Film: Rose Garnett
Produced by: Michael Elliott, Anita Overland
Archive Producers: Sam Dwyer, Zosia Alchimowicz
Line Producer: Simon Bird
Associate Producer: Helen Bart
Associate Producer for Turbine Studios: Charlotte Andrews
Associate Producer for Lammas Films: Susan Dolan
Production Co-ordinator: Liane Escorza
Production Accountant: Spencer Pawson
Unit Manager: Billie-Jo Jerrom
Supervising Location Manager: Elliott Meddings
Location Managers: Tom Bosanquet, Philip Pinchin
Post-production Supervisor: Emma Zee
1st Assistant Director: Richard Harris
2nd Assistant Director: Antonia Carter
3rd Assistant Director: Danny Scott-Smith
Assistant to Steve McQueen: India Castle-Gibb
Crowd Assistant Director: Adele Elizabeth Orchard
Script Supervisor: Phoebe Billington
Casting: Gary Davy
Screenplay by: Alastair Siddons, Steve McQueen
Director of Photography: Shabier Kirchner
Stills Photographers: Des Willie, Kieron McCarron
Digital Grading, Sound, Titles and Visual FX by: LipSync Post
Special Effects Supervisor: Steve Bowman
Supervising Editor: Chris Dickens
Editors: Chris Dickens, Steve McQueen
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Supervising Art Director: Adam Marshall
Art Director: Guy Bevitt
Standby Art Director: Tyrone Hyman
Assistant Art Director: Louise Lannen
Set Decorator: Hannah Spice
Series Graphic Designer: Lizzy Butler
Graphic Designer: Oona Brown
Production Buyers: Zoe Hoare, Aoife Flynn
Property Master: Nick Walker
Construction Manager: Zane McGill
Costume Designer: Lisa Duncan
Assistant Costume Designer: Poppy Moorcroft
Costume Supervisor: Carly Griffith
Hair and Make-up Designer: Jojo Williams
Hair and Make-up Supervisor: Natasha Nikolic-Dunlop
Title Design: Howard Watkins, Julia Hall, Tom Burke, Chloe Tetu
Digital Colourists: Tom Poole, Company 3

Original Score by: Micachu
Score Performed by: Curl, Therapy Garden, Orchestrate
Orchestration: Jessica Dannheisser
Music Supervisors: Ed Bailie, Abi Leland
Score Supervisor: Bridget Samuels
Music Editor: Lewis Morison
Sound Mixer: Ronald Bailey
Re-recording Mixers: Paul Cotterell, James Harrison
Dialogue Editor: Paul Cotterell
Sound Effects Editor: James Harrison
Consultants: Barbara Beese, Ian Macdonald, Selma James, Paul Gilroy
Cultural Adviser: Michael McMillan
Historical Adviser: Robin Bunce
Dialect Coach: Hazel Holder
Transport Captain: Andy Barton

Cast

Letitia Wright (*Altheia Jones*)
Shaun Parkes (*Frank Crichtlow*)
Malachi Kirby (*Darcus Howe*)
Rochenda Sandall (*Barbara Beese*)
Alex Jennings (*Judge Edward Clarke*)
Jack Lowden (*Ian Macdonald*)
Gary Beadle (*Dol Isaacs*)
Darren Braithwaite (*Anthony Carlisle Inniss*)
Richie Campbell (*Rothwell Kentish*)
Ben Caplan (*Mr Steadman*)
Thomas Coombes (*PC Royce*)
Richard Cordery (*Mr Croft*)
Gershwyn Eustache Jnr (*Eddie Lecointe*)
Duane Facey-Pearson (*Rupert Boyce*)
Llewella Gideon (*Aunt Betty*)
Michelle Greenidge (*Mrs Manning*)
Derek Griffiths (*CLR James*)
Shem Hamilton (*Benson*)
James Hillier (*chief inspector*)
Tyrone Huggins (*Granville*)
Jumayn Hunter (*Godfrey Millett*)
Doreen Ingleton (*Mrs Tetley*)
Tayo Jarrett (*Linton*)
Stefan Kalipha (*card player*)
Akbar Kurtha (*Dr Chadee*)
Nathaniel Martello (*Rhodan Gordon*)
Jodhi May (*Selma James*)
Tahj Miles (*Kendrick Manning*)
Stephen O'Neill (*magistrate*)
Telvin Parr (*Titch*)
Joseph Quinn (*PC Dixon*)
Jay Simpson (*duty officer*)
Sam Spruell (*PC Pulley*)
Joe Tucker (*court officer*)
Samuel West (*Mr Hill*)

UK 2020
128 mins

SMALL AXE

A COLLECTION OF FIVE FILMS

Mangrove + Q&A with director Steve McQueen and Small Axe Consultant Paul Gilroy

Fri 22 Oct 17:30

Lovers Rock + Q&A with director Steve McQueen and actor Dennis Bovell

Fri 22 Oct 20:50

Sonic Cinema Presents: Lovers Rock After Party

Fri 22 Oct (Spiritland in Royal Festival Hall) 22:00-02:00

Talk: The Making of Small Axe with Steve McQueen, Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner and guests

Sat 23 Oct 16:00

Red, White and Blue Sat 23 Oct 18:30

Alex Wheatle Sat 23 Oct 20:45

Education Sun 24 Oct 18:10

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