



SMALL AXE

Alex Wheatle

The biopic *Alex Wheatle*, directed by Steve McQueen, is a thoroughly pleasing work of televisual cinema, part of his new anthology series *Small Axe* which focuses on West Indian communities in England. This episode deals with the early life of the writer Alex Wheatle, who was awarded an MBE in 2008 for services to literature for his hard-hitting stories of Black peoples, and who now writes books for young adults. McQueen explores Wheatle's coming of age in Brixton, south London – infatuated with sound system culture, lured in by the excitements of street life, he becomes involved in the Brixton riots of 1981. This leads to Wheatle spending time in prison, which is where he is introduced to literature.

The film's narrative structure is classical, in that we have a protagonist who tells his tale to an inquisitive listener – in this case the Rastafarian with whom Wheatle shares a prison cell, and who encourages him to appreciate reading. We see Wheatle's life play out in nonlinear fashion as we cut back and forth between him growing up in a children's home, his adolescence on the streets of London, and his maturation as an adult in prison. The beats through which Wheatle progresses are also classical, as we follow his development from awkward kid in the city who must be taught the ways of urban life to confident hustler taking his destiny into his own hands.

Speaking of beats, McQueen's film is animated by the sounds and cultural specificity of West Indian peoples, particularly their patois and their reggae music. Young Wheatle soon decides that he wants to form his own sound system, which he names Crucial Rocker. For that he needs money, and the only way to get it in his neighbourhood is through marijuana distribution. As this tale of underground life unfolds, the film begins to resemble Franco Rosso's south-east London-set masterwork *Babylon* (1980), which also explored urban life from a West Indian perspective, including vivid depictions of sound system culture. At 60 minutes, McQueen does not really have the canvas upon which to expand and fully explore his material, and he does not advance very far beyond the benchmark set by Rosso's pioneering film. Still, one has to consider *Alex Wheatle* as part of a larger whole, judging the whole series *Small Axe* as an integral work. And even regarded in isolation, *Alex Wheatle* is a solidly crafted and engrossing piece of drama.

Greg de Cuir Jr, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

The takeaway from the *Small Axe* series is surely this: Steve McQueen is doing the cultural work of narrating the histories of Black British people that for too long have remained in a cultural embargo. But what is happening now, in the current moment, that is too taboo, too hot, too politically charged, too dangerous to be shown on screen?

While watching the episode about the writer Alex Wheatle, and his journey from care home to Brixton to prison to political consciousness, I was struck by the character of Dread. He's an older Rastafarian man serving a six-month prison sentence for declaring he was going to destroy the tomb of Edward the Confessor with a pickaxe – revenge for the British empire's destruction of cultural artefacts around the world. He delivers one of my favourite lines: 'Unlearn what you've learned.'

For a boy like the film's Alphonso (he changes his name to Alex Wheatle later), this advice is rooted in him learning to recognise that he is Black, and Blackness is not a skin colour but a set of social conditions designed to place you at the

bottom of the pile socially, and re-enforce the idea of your inherent inferiority. It's a realisation that all Black children in majority white societies must undergo, and you can have one of two reactions: resist the reality of the situation and accept the dominance of white cultural narratives, or accept the fact that there is another story and resist the idea that white, European culture is the apex of humanity itself.

The conclusion that Dread comes to – that he must stand up for himself and learn the truth – culminates in a brilliant scene in which he recommends C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*. This is some hardcore socialist analysis of the Haitian revolution (which is why everyone should read it), but it's the magic act of a book passing from hand to hand that got me; the cultural transmission of powerful ideas from mind to mind. What I saw in that scene was a profound comment on the importance of knowing one's history. But deeper than that, Dread acted as curator, librarian, programmer – he was doing the work of ensuring Alphonso knew the intense, radical history of Black people, a history that has been deliberately kept out of schools and off our television screens.

Recently, I have been watching old BBC *Arena* films, courtesy of the Ilkley Literature Festival and Speaking Volumes. The episodes cover topics such as the social history of carnival, the working-class roots of the steel pans, radical Black poets. At the end of the most recent instalment, the academic Max Farrar notes how important this kind of programming was, and how we no longer see this happening.

This struck a chord, as the struggle for Black cultural production has been characterised by censorship, avoidance delays and underfunding. Indeed the first Black British feature film, Horace Ové's *Pressure* (1976), which looked at a boy not dissimilar to Alex Wheatle, was shelved for at least two years by the BFI before its release because it showed police violence. The matter was too current, too politically charged. I am also thinking about *Blood Ah Go Run* (1982) by Menelik Shabazz, which directly questioned media, state and police indifference towards the 13 dead in the New Cross Fire of 1981.

In another scene in *Alex Wheatle* that I really appreciated, a group of young people discuss the deaths in the fire, with fear initially, but then Alex writes a song in response, and we see those same young people dancing and singing, 'Uprising! Uprising!'

The irony of these lyrics is that we see Alex on the floor of a cell several times in the film: once, in a straitjacket after being dragged out of his classroom having been racially abused; then again when he is arrested in Brixton. I thought of Ken Fero's recent film *Ultraviolence*, which looks at the horrendous deaths of Christopher Alder and Brian Douglas, both of whom died on the floor of a police station – Alex was lucky to live to tell the tale.

It's as though history is not enough. We must see literal death before we can hold our institutions to account. But even then we still see corrupt judges, murderous police officers, faceless bureaucrats who call the shots and are never held to account.

And so I return to my initial question: what are we not seeing? We believe we have progressed as a society, yet films, histories and even TV programming from the 1980s still have the power to shock us. So what is happening today that is too taboo, too difficult, too confronting? Do we have the courage to confront it?

Jay Bernard, bfi.org.uk, 2 December 2020

ALEX WHEATLE

Directed by: Steve McQueen
©: Small Axe Films Ltd
a Turbine Studios and Lammas Park *production*
In association with: Small Axe Films, EMU Films
Supported by: Creative England
A project part financed by the:
European Regional Development Fund programme 2007-2013
In association with: BBC Studios Distribution, Six Temple Productions
For: BBC, Amazon Studios
Presented by: BBC, BBC Films
Executive Producers: Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner, Steve McQueen
Produced by: Michael Elliott, Anita Overland
Archive Producers: Sam Dwyer, Zosia Alchimowicz
Line Producer: Robyn Forsythe
Associate Producers: Susan Dolan, Helen Bart, Charlotte Andrews
Production Accountant: Spencer Pawson
Unit Manager: Rohan Halley
Location Manager: Graeme MacKenzie
Post-production Supervisor: Emma Zee
1st Assistant Director: Richard T. Harris
2nd Assistant Director: Antonia Carter
Script Supervisor: Phoebe Billington
Casting by: Gary Davy
Screenplay by: Alastair Siddons, Steve McQueen
Director of Photography: Shabier Kirchner
Stills Photographers: Parisa Taghizadeh, Will Robson-Scott
Visual Effects Supervisor: Marc Hutchings
Special Effects Supervisors: Steve Bowman, Elly Dunsire
Supervising Editor: Chris Dickens
Editors: Chris Dickens, Steve McQueen
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Supervising Art Director: Adam Marshall
Art Director: Louise Lannen
Set Decorator: Hannah Spice
Graphic Designer: Oona Brown
Production Buyer: Aoife Flynn

Props Master: Nick Walker
Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran
Hair and Make-up Designer: Jojo Williams
Title Design: Howard Watkins, Julia Hall, Tom Burke, Chloe Tetu
Digital Colourist: Tom Poole
Music Supervisors: Ed Bailie, Abi Leland
Sound Mixer: Ronald Bailey
Re-recording Mixers: Paul Cotterell, James Harrison
Dialogue Editor: Paul Cotterell
Stunt Co-ordinators: Tom Lucy, Nrinder Dhudwar
Consultant: Alex Wheatle

Cast

Sheyi Cole (*Alex Wheatle*)
Robbie Gee (*Simeon*)
Khali Best (*Breadstick*)
Fumilayo Brown-Olatej (*Dawn*)
Riley Burgin (*Terry*)
Zakiyyah Deen (*Rita*)
Elliot Edsuah (*Valin*)
Dexter Flanders (*Floyd*)
Jonathan Jules (*Dennis Isaacs*)
Ashley Maguire (*cook*)
Asad-Shareff Muhammad (*young Alex*)
Johann Myers (*Cutlass Rankin*)
Cecilia Noble (*Mrs Isaacs*)
Louis J Rhone (*Rankin's Dread*)
Xavien Russell (*friend at Lincoln's*)
Lennox Tuitt (*Lincoln*)
Leah Walker (*Beverley*)
Shanelle Young (*Gloria Isaacs*)
William Hanson (*schoolboy*)

UK 2020

65 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

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Relaxed Screening: Summer of Soul (... Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised) Tue 26 Oct 18:00

BFI Blu-ray Launch: Short Sharp Shocks II + intro Wed 27 Oct 18:10

Art in the Making: The Black Arts Movement on Film + discussion Wed 27 Oct 20:40

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Anatomy of Wings + pre-recorded Q&A Thu 28 Oct 18:15

Silent Cinema: Body and Soul + intro Sun 31 Oct 14:20

20-22 Omega Sun 31 Oct 14:30; Thu 4 Nov 18:10

Member Picks: Moonlight Fri 5 Nov 18:10

African Odysseys: Black History Walks Presents: Cause for Concern: Equal Before the Law Fri 5 Nov 18:30-21:30

African Odysseys: A Date with the Devil: Darcus Howe's Journey from Black Power to Broadcasting Sat 6 Nov 12:00-18:00

African Odysseys: Travels with my Camera: Is This My Country? + White Tribe Tue 9 Nov 18:10

African Odysseys: Trouble in Paradise + Darcus Howe: Son of Mine Sun 14 Nov 15:30

Terror Vision: Tales from the Hood Thu 25 Nov 20:40

Missing Believed Wiped Session 1: The London Palladium Show Sat 27 Nov 13:00

Missing Believed Wiped Session 2: Introducing 'The Precious Things': Holiday Startime Sat 27 Nov 15:50

Seniors' Free Matinee, in partnership with African Odysseys: Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored + intro Mon 29 Nov 14:00

Relaxed Screening: Petite Maman Tue 30 Nov 18:15

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