



SMALL AXE

Education

Like many small boys, 12-year-old Kingsley dreams of the stars. Absorbed by astronomy and the careful drawing of rockets, he harbours dreams of becoming an astronaut. Yet his ambitions are routinely grounded by the fact that he lives on a dour estate in Haringey, North London, in the early 1970s, and his hardworking parents are in no position to support such lofty ambitions. And the cold reality is that, as a child of West Indian immigrants, Kingsley's future prospects barely stretch to the end of the estate, let alone above the clouds.

Education, one of five films in Steve McQueen's BBC series *Small Axe* depicting the experiences of London's West Indian community between the 1960s and 1980s, is concerned with how the education policies of Haringey council (and others) wilfully disadvantaged non-white children such as Kingsley (Kenyah Sandy). A bright child whose struggles with literacy go unnoticed or ignored, Kingsley is often targeted by his teachers for behaviour overlooked in other children. His English teacher calls him a blockhead for struggling to read in class – from John Steinbeck's problematic *Of Mice and Men* (1937), which contains offensive racist language – and his music teacher manhandles him out of the room for a minor infraction.

Summoned to the office of his tight-lipped headmaster, Kingsley and his mother (Sharlene Whyte) – who is continually exhausted and short-tempered from working several jobs – learn that Kingsley has scored low in an IQ test and will be bussed several miles away to a school for special needs children. Their protestations fall on deaf ears, and Kingsley is told to make the best of the situation. On arrival, Kingsley finds a poorly run institution with inept teachers who leave the children to their own devices. Unable to communicate his complaints to his mother, Kingsley resigns himself to spending his days bored, asleep or running riot. The light goes out of his eyes.

It's a damning, semi-autobiographical portrait of a broken system, and McQueen and co-writer Alastair Siddons (who also collaborated on two of the other films, *Mangrove* and *Alex Wheatle*) effectively distil the complexities of this huge issue through the experiences of this single family across a one-hour running time. On the surface are the dirty looks and explicit slurs, including a viciously racist remark by one of Kingsley's own special needs teachers when he enquires as to how he should spend his lunch break. But these are only the tip of the iceberg.

While it's clear that these shameful practices are a product of the institutionalised racism that defined much of England in the 1970s (and, let's be frank, endures), *Education* goes further, to explore the painful realities of an ethnic community ill-equipped to protest against their treatment. As first-generation West Indian immigrants, Kingsley's mother and father (a taciturn Daniel Francis) are driven by the desire to give their children a better life, but utterly stymied by their circumstances. They work all hours at menial jobs to put food on the table, and simply haven't got the time to scrutinise or question what's happening to their son. They have no choice but to trust that the system will care for their children.

And so, when local activists open Kingsley's mother's eyes to the realities of her son's education, by way of the real-life 1971 booklet by Bernard Coard entitled *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System*, it's a small but significant moment of revolution. Kingsley's parents are initially unsure of their ability to take on this fight and, more than that, unwilling to rock the boat in a country where they remain outsiders. Yet the knowledge that

Kingsley will be one of an entire lost generation, singled out for nothing more than his race, lights a fire under this household. (Tellingly, it's Kingsley's older sister, played by a vibrant Naomie Ackie, who helps persuade her parents – and, particularly, her reticent father – that they have the autonomy, and the right, to demand change.)

In line with the intimate narrative, the cinematographer Shabier Kirchner (who has shot all of the *Small Axe* films) keeps the focus contained, the colour muted. The hugely endearing Kenyah Sandy often fills the screen, his young features full of innocent joy or abject confusion about things he doesn't understand. When, at film's end, he joins a lively and passionate local Saturday school, full of kids like him, Kingsley begins to unfurl and fresh air rushes into the film.

'What do we know about our ancestors?', asks the teacher. 'That we were slaves,' is the answer. 'That is what they want us to know,' she retorts, before launching into a lesson about ancient kings and queens in Africa. The message is clear; the teaching of Black history, as well as of Black children, has been woefully inadequate, and it is our collective responsibility to expand our education on this subject.

Nikki Baughan, *Sight & Sound*, Winter 2020-2021

Black Britain Historian David Olusoga talks to Steve McQueen

If I can speak personally, I left watching Education till last, and it's the one that's impacted me the most. You mentioned your education; I was diagnosed special educational needs. I was in a remedial class. There was myself and the kids who'd just come from Vietnam who couldn't speak English.

I remember being aware that this was the road to disaster – that I wasn't being educated; I was being warehoused. My mother was terrified for me, she was agitating and pushing, and I was being educated at home, because we knew that schools weren't happening. And only latterly realising that that was a common phenomenon. There are a lot of people out there for whom Education is going to be a punch in the guts. You had similar experiences?

Very much. My school was sectioned to houses. And at 14 you're put into either 3C1, which is, say, the normal kids' education, or 3C2, which is the people who are going to be the labourers or bricklayers, you know, the manual workers. And above and below were 3X, which were the brightest kids; and 3Y, which were all the kids who weren't particularly bright. So I was cast aside really, and the journey of my life was drawn in the sand when I was 14 years old.

I went back to my school in 2000, handing out achievement awards, and the headmaster [told me that] when I was there, the school was institutionally racist. But I knew that. Some of my friends had recently bumped into my old deputy head, and he said that he realised the school was failing Black children and said to the headmaster: 'We need to do something.' And the headmaster said: 'You do know what this will mean? More Black children will go to the school because it will be successful.' So, basically, the school was investing in Black failure.

***Sight & Sound*, Winter 2020-2021**

EDUCATION

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
Creative England, a project financed by:
The European Regional Development Fund Programme 2007-1013
In association with: BBC Studios Distribution, Six Temple Productions
For: BBC, Amazon Studios
Presented by: BBC, BBC Film
Executive Producers: Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner, Steve McQueen, Paul Ashton, Lucy Richer
Commissioning Executive: Ayela Butt
Executive Producer: Rose Garnett
Produced by: Anita Overland, Michael Elliott
Archive Producers: Sam Dwyer, Zosia Alchimowicz
Line Producer: Deborah Aston
Associate Producers: Helen Bart, Charlotte Andrews, Susan Dolan
Production Co-ordinator: Jen McKeown
Production Accountant: Spencer Pawson
Supervising Location Manager: Rob Jones
Location Manager: Midge Ferguson
Post-production Supervisor: Emma Zee
1st Assistant Director: Richard T. Harris
2nd Assistant Director: Antonia Carter
3rd Assistant Director: Danny Scott-Smith
Script Supervisor: Phoebe Billington
Casting by: Gary Davy
Screenplay by: Alastair Siddons, Steve McQueen
Story by: Steve McQueen
Director of Photography: Shabier Kirchner
Stills Photographer: Will Robson Scott
Visual FX by: LipSync Post
Special Effects Supervisor: Scott McIntyre
Supervising Editor: Chris Dickens
Editor: Chris Dickens, Steve McQueen
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Supervising Art Director: Adam Marshall
Art Director: Philip A. Brown
Set Decorator: Hannah Spice
Lead Graphic Designer: Lizzy Butler
Graphic Designer: Oona Brown
Production Buyer: Aoife Flynn
Props Master: Jason Wood

Construction Manager: Jason Reilly
Costume Designer: Sinead Kidao
Hair and Make-up Designer: Jojo Williams
Title Design: Howard Watkins, Julia Hall, Tom Burke, Chloe Tetu
Titles by: LipSync Post
Digital Grading by: LipSync Post
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
Sound Effects Editor: James Harrison
Dialect Coach: Hazel Holder

Cast

Kenyah Sandy (*Kingsley*)
Sharlene Whyte (*Agnes Smith*)
Naomi Ackie (*Hazel*)
Jade Anouka (*Mrs Morrison*)
Temirlan Blaev (*pupil*)
Nigel Boyle (*Mr Hamley*)
Tabitha Byron (*Sheila*)
Ralph Davis (*senior teacher*)
Kate Dickie (*Miss Gill*)
Sam Fourness (*Mr Kimble*)
Daniel Francis (*Esmond Smith*)
Aiyana Goodfellow (*Nina*)
Roshawn Hewitt (*Baz*)
Trevor Laird (*Augustin Wood*)
Tamara Lawrance (*Stephanie Smith*)
Jo Martin (*Mrs Bartholomew*)
Ryan Masher (*Joseph*)
Kayla Meikle (*Mrs Howard*)
Nathan Moses (*Ashley*)
Adrian Rawlins (*headmaster*)
Kenyah Sandy (*Kingsley Smith*)
Josette Simon (*Lydia*)
Kemal Sylvester (*bus driver*)
Jairaj Varsani (*Sajid*)
Stewart Wright (*Mr Baines*)

UK 2020

63 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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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