



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Burning an Illusion

Introduced by actor Cassie McFarlane

Produced and released at a time of great injustice during the widespread struggle for civil rights, this powerful coming-of-age tale follows the story of a young woman's emerging political and emotional development. Its urgent message of the need for awareness on a personal but also a social level is no less urgent today. It's also a reminder of the richness of Black music, of Lovers Rock and of a vibrant Reggae culture in which women played a prominent role. This restored version (for later release on Blu-Ray) shows the film in its original splendour.

bfi.org.uk

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

Four 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

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

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

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Preview: The Afterlight + Q&A with director Charlie Shackleton
Wed 29 Jun 18:20
BUG 63 Fri 1 Jul 20:45; Fri 15 Jul 20:45
LIFF: In Conversation with Aparna Sen Sat 2 Jul 17:00
Preview: Explorer + extended intro with Sir Ranulph Fiennes and director Matt Dyas Mon 4 Jul 18:45
Glenda Jackson in Conversation Tue 5 Jul 18:15
I Will Tell International Film Festival Opening night: UK Premiere: Clock + Q&A Thu 7 Jul 18:00
Laurent Garnier: Off the Record + Q&A with Laurent Garnier Sat 9 Jul 20:30
Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI Mon 11 Jul 18:30

IN THE BLACK FANTASTIC: VISIONARY FILMS OF AFROFUTURISM, MYTH AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

The Brother from Another Planet Fri 1 Jul 18:05; Wed 6 Jul 20:45
Sankofa Sat 2 Jul 14:00 (+ intro by June Givanni, June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive); Wed 20 Jul 20:35
Daughters of the Dust Sat 2 Jul 20:30; Wed 13 Jul 20:40
Yeelen Brightness Sun 3 Jul 15:50; Thu 14 Jul 20:40
Top of the Heap Mon 4 Jul 18:10; Sat 30 Jul 20:45
In the Afrofuture Tue 5 Jul 18:20; Sun 17 Jul 16:00
Atlantics (Atlantique) Thu 7 Jul 20:50; Sun 31 Jul 15:40
Kuso Sat 9 Jul 20:50; Fri 22 Jul 18:10
Touki Bouki Wed 13 Jul 17:50 (+ season introduction); Wed 27 Jul 20:50
The Burial of Kojo Fri 15 Jul 18:30; Thu 28 Jul 20:40
The Black Atlantic Mon 18 Jul 18:15 (+ Q&A); Sat 30 Jul 12:00
Eve’s Bayou Tue 19 Jul 20:45; Thu 28 Jul 18:00

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