



RE-RELEASES

# Burning an Illusion

## Reigniting the flame: Menelik Shabazz's *Burning an Illusion*, 40 years on

When Menelik Shabazz died on 28 June 2021, aged 67, he left behind a body of work that stands as a pioneering contribution to British and pan-African cinema. From his 1977 debut doc *Step Forward Youth*, which sought to subvert negative media stereotyping of young Black people by giving them a space in which to speak, the Barbados-born British filmmaker centred the experiences of Black Britons with notable complexity, candour and insight across a range of features and documentaries.

This focus expanded into broader contexts, too. An advocate of collaborative working, Shabazz co-founded Ceddo Film and Video Workshop in 1984, as well as *Black Filmmaker Magazine (bfm)* in 1998 and the bfm International Film Festival the following year; all of these initiatives promoted the development, visibility and empowerment of Black creatives.

Two of the films that are most central to Shabazz's legacy are those that he made in 1981, while still in his late twenties: the documentary *Blood Ah Go Run* and his fiction feature debut *Burning an Illusion*. Though very different, these are essentially companion pieces that take the temperature of the turbulent late 1970s and early 80s: a period characterised by a vibrant outpouring of Black British cultural expression but also by strong National Front presence, aggressive policing and anti-immigration rhetoric expressed by the new Conservative government. With its reference to 'truncheon-wielding thugs in the Metropolitan police', *Blood Ah Go Run* offers a short but scorching snapshot from the frontlines of the protests that followed the New Cross fire of January 1981.

*Burning an Illusion*, by contrast, emits a slower, steadier flame. Shabazz's fiction debut was only the second British feature to be made by a Black director in the UK, following Horace Ové's *Pressure* in 1976. Shabazz spent time on the set of Ové's film and was inspired by it. In contrast to *Pressure*, though, *Burning an Illusion* is immediately distinguished by its placing of a Black female character at the centre of the narrative in a way that was unprecedented in British cinema up to that point (though Colette Laffont's investigating protagonist in Sally Potter's 1979 short *Thriller* should not be overlooked) – and that remains all too rare even today.

The film's focus is on Pat Williams (played by Cassie McFarlane in an *Evening Standard* award-winning performance), a 22-year-old office worker who narrates her story of love, strife and political awakening in early 80s London. Pat is introduced as a heroine with thoroughly conventional aspirations – she has her own flat and is looking to settle down with a partner – but her priorities are dramatically challenged and changed by events. Her progress is at once specific – rooted in her lived experience as a Black woman at this time – and archetypal, constituting a classic journey of self-realisation that takes the character from a state of innocence to experience. That arc plays out primarily through the shifting dynamic in Pat's relationship with Del Bennett (Victor Romero Evans), the charismatic, moody boyfriend whose

incarceration following an incident of police violence brings Pat to Black Power consciousness and activism.

While its wider international reputation has grown significantly over the years, *Burning an Illusion* certainly had an immediate impact on its core audience. Writing in the *Caribbean Times* in February 1982, following a screening of the film at London's Festival of Black Independent Film Makers, Isabel Appio vividly describes the atmosphere of the evening:

'The most overwhelming audience turnout was for *Burning an Illusion*, which had eager viewers spilling into the aisles. Females reacted openly: cheering Pat through her journey as she confronts her troublesome boyfriend and discovers a more rewarding political identity. It was proved that night that there is a vast and receptive audience who at the moment is starved of films dealing with subjects with which they can identify.'

In highlighting the audience's enthusiastic reaction to the film, one stemming from a close (and gendered) connection to its presentation of relatable life experiences, Appio pinpoints the importance of what So Mayer in *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* terms 'representational justice'. However, compared with other British counter-cinema of the period, such as the films of Derek Jarman or Potter's *The Gold Diggers* (1983), *Burning an Illusion* is in no sense a formally radical or experimental work. Rather, Shabazz places the film squarely within the tradition of British cinematic realism, the better to emphasise both its continuity and difference. The film self-consciously carves out a space for Black characters excluded from that tradition – or who had previously been included only as part of an integrated ensemble in such important, but always white-directed, 'social problem' pictures as *Sapphire* (1959) and *Flame in the Streets* (1961).

In contrast, Pat is immediately established as the central consciousness of *Burning an Illusion*; the film moves to the rhythm of her perceptions and experiences. Shabazz stated that the image of 'a woman looking into a mirror' was an initial inspiration. Pat, we learn, had ambitions to be a beautician, and takes great care over her physical appearance: the film is punctuated by moments in which she is seen diligently putting on makeup. The turning point in this group of scenes comes when the film briefly but potently disrupts its naturalistic framework with a fourth wall break. At a pivotal juncture, Pat decisively takes off her jewellery and gives herself a stern look in the mirror as she removes her lipstick, a glance that also becomes a direct look to camera. This arresting moment conveys a radical shift in the protagonist's self-image: her rejection of a previous mode of being and a claiming of subjectivity expressed in her return of the viewer's gaze.

As Bonnie Greer notices, *Burning an Illusion* 'takes us, without compromise, into a complete world', and, shot on location around Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove, the film demonstrates particular care in its evocation of the various social spaces that Pat inhabits. We see her with her parents, at her workplace, at house parties, on nights out in clubs (in one of these sequences, singer Janet Kay appears, performing 'Imagine That'), at the Notting Hill Carnival, in prisons, hospitals and at the Black Liberation Front's Grassroots Storefront bookshop. The film's texture comes precisely from its attention to these lived-in details, while its dynamic use of reggae not only enhances its atmospheric evocation of Black London but also connects to the interwoven elements of race consciousness and romance in the plot.

While Shabazz's writing and Romero Evans' performance bring some nuance to the role, a contemporary perspective might demand a more critical take on the character of Del, whose chauvinism and aggression towards Pat in their domestic quarrels is brushed aside once he himself becomes a victim of police violence. There's also a sense of the female protagonist's journey as, ultimately, dependent upon the male's, as Pat's engagement with radical Black literature follows directly on from Del's. 'His interest in books was rubbing off on me,' Pat tells us in voiceover, taking a Malcolm X volume down from the shelf – one of several examples of the way in which the narration is used in an editorialising manner to spell out what the viewer could easily perceive without guidance. Further, the film appears to suggest that not only Pat's politics but also her physical transformation require Del's endorsement. 'You look really nice. Natural,' he reassures her during a prison visit, admiring her dreads and lack of makeup. 'That's how me like you.' In short, Pat has succeeded in becoming her boyfriend's new ideal: an activist he can proudly claim as 'my African woman'.

At the same time, the film's patriarchal undertones are complicated by its insistence on Pat as the focal point and, especially, by its emphasis on scenes of female interaction and solidarity. The sequences featuring Pat and her close friends Cynthia (Angela Wynter) and Sonia (Beverley Martin), each of them with an entirely different outlook on life, relationships and race, provide some of the film's most delightful, perceptive and humorous moments. The film is bookended by scenes set in female spaces, opening with a pan across a hairdressing salon where we see women undergoing various treatments, the camera finally settling on Pat and Sonia as they chat animatedly under the dryers. Judy Mowatt's song 'Slave Queen' plays over this credit sequence, its lyrics of self-care and emancipation foreshadowing the journey that Pat will undertake.

Regrettably, *Burning an Illusion* itself did not inaugurate the golden age of Black British cinema that it might have done, a fact that Shabazz himself acknowledged in a 1989 interview in which he identified the situation for Black filmmakers in the UK as 'very depressing... You continually try to push ideas through, but the overall situation for independent filmmakers is not very good.' Yet *Burning an Illusion* has at least remained a much-loved, enduringly popular cultural touchstone, one with a wide reach. More than merely a window on a pivotal period in Black British history, the film remains a vibrant and liberating experience today, its themes of romance, friendship, self-discovery and community resonating beyond the specific context from which it emerged.

The legacy of the film can be felt across Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series (2020), and in Shabazz's own later documentary projects, especially *The Story of Lovers Rock* (2011) and *Looking for Love* (2015), the latter of which carries *Burning an Illusion*'s concern with Black love (albeit exclusively straight) into the digital age. Viewed today, *Burning an Illusion* can't help but prompt reflection on what has and hasn't changed in terms of Black British experience and representation in the last 40 years. The film's own perspective is touchingly optimistic. The final scene leaves Pat newly confident, secure in the next steps of her journey, connected in sisterhood and song.

**Alex Ramon, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 15 August 2022**

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## 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

A BFI release

*Burning an Illusion* will be released on BFI Blu-ray on 19 September

## 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©

101 mins

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### No Place Like Home: Redux

Fri 19 Aug 18:40

### Steppin' Razor: Red X

Sat 20 Aug 14:45

### Reggae Futures

Sat 20 Aug 17:30

### Lion of Judah, War in Ethiopia, 1935-1936 + discussion

Tue 23 Aug 18:20

### Sprinter

Fri 26 Aug 18:10

### Better Mus' Come

Sat 27 Aug 20:45

### African Redemption: The Life and Legacy of Marcus Garvey

Sun 28 Aug 14:50

### Rudeboy: The Story of Trojan Records

Sun 28 Aug 18:30

### Bob Marley: The Making of a Legend

+ Q&A with directors Esther Anderson and Gian Godoy

Tue 30 Aug 18:10

## NEW RELEASES

### Hit the Road (Jaddeh Khaki)

Continues from Fri 29 Jul

### The Feast

From Fri 19 Aug

### Where Is Anne Frank

From Fri 19 Aug

### My Old School

From Fri 19 Aug

### Queen of Glory

From Fri 28 Aug

## RE-RELEASES

### The Big City (Mahanagar)

Continues from Fri 22 Jul

### Paris, Texas

Continues from Fri 29 Jul

### The Harder They Come

From Fri 5 Aug

### Burning an Illusion

From Fri 19 Aug

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