



AFRICAN ODYSSEY PREVIEW

Chevalier

Chevalier

Directed by: Stephen Williams
Produced by: Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe, Stefani Robinson, Dianne McGunigle
Written by: Stefani Robinson
Director of Photography: Jess Hall
Editor: John Axelrad
Production Designer: Karen Murphy
Set Decorator: Lotty Sanna
Costume Designer: Oliver Garcia
Hair and Make-up Designer: Roo Maurice
Composer of Original Score: Kris Bowers
Music Supervisor: Maggie Rodford
Musical Performances Produced and Arranged by: Michael Abels
Cast:
Kelvin Harrison Jr
(Joseph Bologne, 'Chevalier')
Samara Weaving
(Marie-Josephine de Comarieu)
Lucy Boynton (Marie Antoinette)
Minnie Driver (La Guimard)
Sian Clifford (Madame De Genlis)
Ronke Adékoluéjé
(Nanon, Joseph's mother)
Márton Csókás (Marquis de Montalembert, Marie-Josephine's husband)
Alex Fitzalan (Philippe, Duke of Orleans)
USA 2022
108 mins

Courtesy of Searchlight Pictures

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*
* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Set in 18th Century France, *Chevalier* unfolds the vivid, timely story of the soaring rise and defiant spirit of the musical phenomenon, Joseph Bologne, aka the Chevalier de Saint-Georges. The Chevalier was what we would call today a superstar – a blinding multi-talent at the top of several games: he was a virtuoso violinist who gave packed concerts; a champion swordsman; an ingenious composer; and, for a time, one of the most alluring, unexpected members of Marie Antoinette's glittering court.

Historians have long struggled to document Bologne's life. With his papers and his music destroyed in Napoleonic times, little is known of his inner experiences moving in the sphere of the elites. Director Stephen Williams (*Watchmen*) and screenwriter Stefani Robinson (*Atlanta*) aimed to give Bologne a fresh, contemporary life on screen. With many of the details imagined based on extensive research of the period, *Chevalier* is a buoyant and aspiring vision of a man driven to create and to truly be who he was, no matter the expectations put upon him, or the dreams forbidden to those like him.

Bologne was the illegitimate son of an African slave and a French plantation owner, a man of color in a society rife with racist beliefs and laws. In the midst of mounting bigotry and raging social fury, his path would take a turn – as he ultimately rebelled against the aristocracy that adored his talents yet disparaged his heritage and confined his potential.

While his story is set in the 18th Century, it also speaks strongly to this moment. From its high-voltage opening violin battle, the film lends Bologne a touch of rock-and-roll swagger. But if Bologne's fame and radiance echo the world of the modern pop star, his tale is equally an exploration of something very relatable today: how a person breaks out from the trap of what others expect or demand.

Robinson, who first was inspired by the Chevalier as a teenager, remembers being astonished by how epic his life was – from being born on a slave plantation to befriending the Queen. 'His life had so many arcs and it was extraordinarily cinematic,' she says. 'Joseph always felt like a rock star to me.'

Determined to bring his life to the screen, she saw a chance to revive his legend – it's a story of identity, of someone who broke the frame, and then paid the price of being left out of the picture. 'The more I learned about him, the more I was frustrated that people don't know who he is,' says Robinson. 'It was not easy to get him to the screen, but the fact that it's here and feels so alive is a very special thing.'

Williams, a celebrated television director/producer and Emmy Award winner for the groundbreaking Tulsa Riots episode of the *Watchmen* series, was so drawn to the story that he chose *Chevalier* to make his big screen directing debut. He was drawn to recreating one of the most sumptuous eras in human history from an unseen angle, but even more so to 'redressing the imbalances of historical storytelling.' Williams explains, 'I'm very interested in reclaiming the stories of people who led compelling, impactful lives yet have been ignored and dismissed in the larger narrative.'

Bologne is a spectacular example of someone denied his due. He went from being a towering celebrity and influencer to evaporating from the pages of history books for centuries.

Williams zeroed in on the pressure Joseph must have felt, a pressure he knows well – the mindset that you must be ten times better than your peers, and above reproach, just to be valued. 'You see Joseph start out believing that if he can just excel at everything he does, he'll be accepted into aristocratic society,' comments Williams. 'But what he discovers is that social acceptance is not what counts. It is self-acceptance that is most important in a life journey.'

The film's period, one of rampant artistic innovation yet social upheaval, also felt intimately linked to ours, and Williams structured the film looking not just backwards but forwards. 'The French Revolution is so reminiscent of the social convulsions we've seen globally over the last few years, with similar outcries for equality and greater accountability, he notes. 'It's a world that mirrors our own.'

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Preview: Chevalier

Thu 1 Jun 18:10

Dexter Fletcher in Conversation

Sun 4 Jun 14:00

Ghosted + intro by Dexter Fletcher

Sun 4 Jun 16:20

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 5 Jun 18:30

TV Preview: The Full Monty + Q&A with cast members Robert Carlyle, Lesley Sharp, Mark Addy and Talitha Wing and director Andrew Chaplin

Tue 6 Jun 18:00

Preview: War Pony

Wed 7 Jun 20:45

TV Preview: Black Mirror – Beyond the Sea + Q&A with writer/creator Charlie Brooker, actor Josh Hartnett, executive producer Jessica Rhoades, director John Crowley

Mon 12 Jun 18:15

Sonic Cinema presents: Preview: I Am Weekender + Q&A

Thu 15 Jun 20:30

Preview: Elemental + Q&A with director Peter Sohn, producer Denise Ream, actors Leah Lewis and Mamoudou Athie

Sun 18 Jun 12:45

TV Preview: Champion + Q&A with writer Candice Carty-Williams, cast members Déja J Bownes, Malcolm Kamulete, Ray BLK, and director John Ogunmuyiwa

Mon 19 Jun 18:15

Refugee Week: UK Premiere: The Woodman

Mon 19 Jun 20:50

Refugee Week: Preview: Name Me Lawand + discussion with director Edward Lovelace and Steve Crump OBE, founder and chair of Deaf Kidz International

Tue 20 Jun 18:10

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

For Kelvin Harrison Jr (*Luce, Monsters and Men*) – who studied violin for 7 hours daily to embody the title role—the Chevalier felt incredibly modern, especially the way he moves so fluidly between the worlds of music, sport, and ultimately the fight for justice. ‘I felt I could understand him as a Black artist. His path reflects how we all struggle to find the spaces where we can be seen and heard,’ Harrison says. ‘This story asks big questions about art and equality and why so many Black artists have been erased, but it’s also a beautiful celebration of the Chevalier’s life.’

American President John Adams once declared Joseph Bologne as ‘the most talented man in Europe. It was an astonishing accolade for someone born in the Caribbean under the Code Noir, the French legal document that diminished and controlled every aspect of the lives of people of color – from whom they could marry, to what religion they could follow, to which punishments they would endure.

Bologne forged stunning success out of these unjust circumstances. He was born in 1745 on the island of Guadeloupe to a wealthy French plantation owner and his 16-year-old slave from Senegal, known as Nanon. His father sent him as a child to Paris and then to the famed La Boëssière Academy to study music, math, literature, and fencing – all necessary in Enlightenment France. Joseph not only excelled in these, he triumphed.

As he came of age, his many skills multiplied and advanced. He became legendary as Europe’s most undefeated fencer and lauded as a dancer, equestrian and fashion trendsetter. Soon, people flocked to his violin concerts as he gained a reputation for pushing the instrument to its limits. He went even further as a composer, writing some of the world’s first, pioneering string quartets and helping to establish the rich symmetry and melody of the Baroque era. Complex and emotional, his work influenced other composers, including, many scholars suggest, his contemporary, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He was made an officer of the King’s Guard and dubbed Chevalier de Saint-Georges in 1762.

Yet, even while leading a life of creative opportunity in Paris, Bologne was not afforded the same rights as others and was subjected to limits on his freedom and, at times, to outright hatred. While France’s Enlightenment philosophers opposed slavery, Bologne was well aware that the monarchy supported it. On the cusp of becoming the first person of color to head the Paris Opera, way ahead of his time, a trio of divas intervened, declaring they would never ‘submit to orders of a mulatto.’

All of this dramatic history stunned writer Stefani Robinson when she discovered Bologne in her teens. She would soon come to the fore as a young talent in her own right. In her early 20s, she became a writer/producer for the inventive Donald Glover comedy series *Atlanta*. But even while working in television, she says, ‘I always had this story on my mind.’

When she was ready to write, Robinson hunted down as much information as she could get her hands on. Still, she faced glaring gaps in Bologne’s life and relationships, and imagination would have to fill in. This opened up what became a central theme for the film: how Joseph learned to follow his own path, not the one laid out by society. He came to defy the aristocracy he once moved within and was changed by a love made impossible by his race. And he rediscovered his heritage, bringing Creole influences to his music and fighting for his people.

‘My approach was to use the limited history that has been documented as a jumping off point but not let it become a shackle,’ Robinson explains. ‘I was interested in telling a story with a historical context but with a strong modern lens on it.’

That modern lens felt intensely personal, especially as she wrote about the heightened scrutiny that people of color face. ‘I can only speak for myself as a Black woman, but so often I’ve been told directly or indirectly that you can’t make mistakes, you need to be the best, you can never be enough. That’s an idea we challenge in this movie,’ says Robinson. ‘Joseph throws himself into achievement as a means of feeling love and acceptance, of escaping from the literal and metaphorical plantation. But as he grows, there’s a deeper understanding of himself as a Black artist and a questioning of how he can use his voice.’

Production notes