

ARTS



Dennis Haysbert, above, plays Nelson Mandela in 'Goodbye Bafana'. He is so incredibly beefy that he conveys not a whisper of Mandela's delicate charm

Mandela deserves a better biopic



Goodbye Bafana

15 CERT, 140 MINS

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Goodbye Bafana belongs, with last year's *The Last King of Scotland*, to the "sideways" category of political biopic: the story of a great historical figure as told by a random bloke with whom he happened to come into contact. This model remains popular with producers (it offers all the grandeur of the true life story without the budgetary requirements and scrutiny of a full-scale biopic), but runs the risk of skirting around the edge of the story, avoiding its heart.

Goodbye Bafana is the tale of Nelson Mandela's 27 years in prison as told by his real-life prison guard James Gregory (Joseph Fiennes). The initial problem is that Gregory's story isn't terribly interesting. We first meet him in 1968 as an ingenué apartheid prison officer, and watch as (aided by memories of his childhood friendship with a friendly "kafir" called Bafana, and his consequent knowledge of Mandela's dialect) he gradually befriends the

great man. He is charged with censoring the prison correspondence, and we expect him to become somehow complicit in passing messages from Mandela to his ANC colleagues – but he never does. We then expect Gregory's childhood friend Bafana to be imprisoned on Robben Island – but we never meet him. The only way Gregory acts to alleviate Mandela's imprisonment is to pass a Christmas present, a chocolate, to Mandela's wife Winnie.

The sense of a hole in the story is corroborated by a bit of research. According to Mandela's official biographer, Anthony Samson, Mandela disavowed Gregory's memoir when it came out, and even considered suing him. According to Samson, Gregory rarely spoke to Mandela and used the correspondence he was charged with censoring to falsify a friendship with him. Who knows what really happened, but there is certainly a paucity of dramatic scenes of friendship between the two of them. The high point, through all the wistful looks and portentous scowls, is a cringeworthy scene of the two of them stick-fighting with tomato plant supports, just as they were. By the time Mandela is released, they have become a kind of distinctly second-rate, and this has the effect of giving a faintly ridiculous air to the whole affair. James Gregory and

his wife are an implausibly glamorous couple for rough prison guard NCOs on Robben Island. Mrs Gregory is played by German supermodel Diane Kruger, for Pete's sake, better known as Helen in *Troy*. Mandela's President Palmer (Dennis Haysbert) from the American series *24* – not much of an actor on the best of days, and so incredibly tall and beefy that he conveys not a whisper of Mandela's delicate charm. As for the ageing of the two men over 30 years, Gregory suddenly gets a moustache and a son

The only way Gregory acts to alleviate Mandela's imprisonment is to pass on a chocolate to his wife

who looks older than him, and Nelson gets greying hair and no wrinkles. Oh, and he talks like Mr Miyagi from *Karate Kid*: "We all have gwa jabs to do, Mista Gre-gor-er."

By about half way, I started finding it seriously irritating. On one of his off-duty trips to Capetown, Gregory sneaks off to the library and looks at a copy of the "Freedom Charter," the founding edict of Mandela's ANC. It is an illegal document which he would be sacked for possessing. He steals it, and then instead of reading it in the privacy of his home, he chooses to read it at the most dangerous possible moments, such as behind the warden's back in his

prison office. The scene is intended to induce suspense, but just makes Gregory look like an idiot. I mean, why would you do that? And why, after he gets into a fight for being a "kafir-lover", does Gregory still have the scab five years later? And why does he wear bright white polka-dotted pyjamas? And what is the point of his super-model wife, except to complain about the size of the garden every time they move home? And could they really not think of a better way to do background politics than having unidentified generals gossiping over tea in a hotel lobby?

No, the only thing this movie must be properly credited for is painting a gruesomely unattractive picture of apartheid South Africa. The black prisoners on Robben Island were given a daily chore of pointlessly breaking up pieces of slate in a blindingly bright chalk pit. They were forbidden from mentioning prison conditions or politics than having unidentified generals gossiping over tea in a hotel lobby? No, the only thing this movie must be properly credited for is painting a gruesomely unattractive picture of apartheid South Africa. The black prisoners on Robben Island were given a daily chore of pointlessly breaking up pieces of slate in a blindingly bright chalk pit. They were forbidden from mentioning prison conditions or politics than having unidentified generals gossiping over tea in a hotel lobby?

To keep his spirit throughout those dark years, Mandela truly is a hero. He deserves a more insightful treatment in film than this one.

The growing pains of a crazed prince



BALLET REVIEW
Dennis Chang

Mayerling
ROYAL OPERA HOUSE, LONDON

What is English ballet? I am often asked, as if the ethos of a national institution can be summarised with a soundbite. When pressed, I'd bring up the Royal Ballet's two choreographic masters, the Peruvian-born Frederick Ashton and the Scottish-born Kenneth MacMillan. "What makes their ballets English?" the question would inevitably follow. I suppose it has something to do with our heritage and our love for theatre, programmed by the Royal Ballet this spring. Hot on the heels of John Cranko's weepy *Olegin* is Kenneth MacMillan's *Mayerling*. While the former condenses Alexander Pushkin's prose-poem into a straightforward love story, MacMillan's full evening ballet is a sprawling historical epic that uses an entire epoch as a backdrop to chart the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince Rudolf.

A violent, morphine-aided infidel with incestuous impulses, Rudolf has become the ultimate anti-hero since the ballet's premiere in 1978. His list of romantic, familial and diplomatic vices culminate in a double suicide with his 17-year-old mistress, Rudolf's solos are filled with head-clutching and arm-waving angst, expressed often in moments of private contemplation as Nicholas Georgiadis's sumptuous palatial décor fades into darkness. Rudolf's duets with seven women – all lovers of course, with the exception of his mother – are invariably acrobatic. He dances with the wife he detests and the mistress he desires with the same lack of tenderness. He forces himself on the former with a contemptuous vehemence, while he makes love to the latter with a maniacal hunger.

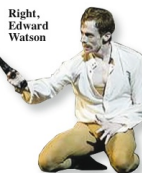
The Royal Ballet's sole British principal male dancer, Edward Watson, was entrusted with the opening performance of this revival. Pale, wiry, and exceptionally pliable, Watson's Rudolf was an autistic Frankenstein trapped in the body of a prince. His eerily deadpan acting in the court scenes contrasted powerfully with the wrought lines he brought to the big dance numbers. While Watson interpreted Rudolf's cruelty as a manifestation of his

psychological malaise, Johan Kobborg was effortlessly nasty in a later cast. In sheer dancing terms, Kobborg survived better in this most physically taxing of ballets, but I was not convinced that either star in the course of the evening untangled the web wrapped around Rudolf's heart, a heart with which MacMillan ultimately sympathised.

I doubt MacMillan had any sympathy for the many women of *Mayerling*. Although he managed to give each a signature imprint, the aristocratic women of the Austrian court and the whores he lavished seemed to me equally undeveloped ciphers. The choreographer objectifies them as symbols of authority, obligation, temptation, conscience and desire – stimulants that corrode but do not penetrate Rudolf's psyche.

Mayerling does see the sexual awakening of Rudolf's youngest mistress Baroness Mary Vetsera. She started out as a child guest at Rudolf's wedding reception. By Act II, she had developed into a precocious teen with a social-climbing instinct. She was knowing enough to charge into Rudolf's apartment in a black negligee, undaunted by his love of the Austrian court. So deranged and uninhibited was she that each of his grotesqueries turned into an aphrodisiac. When he proposed that they commit double suicide, she was all too ready for an attempt at the "ultimate high". Yes, MacMillan must have relished the opportunity to create a monster-ette, but he probably didn't love her – as he did Rudolf.

The young lovers' final minutes turned into an out-and-out primal scream. She aggressively flung herself at him to show her utter submission, while he dangled her upside down. MacMillan left nothing to the imagination. As Franz Liszt's *Harmonie du soir* surges from one climax to the next, I was overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness observing the morbid proceeding on stage, so joyless and with such innocence lost. Perhaps these seamy young souls foretold the seismic turbulence to come in the ensuing decades. At the same time, however, when stripped of the historical and political overlay, *Mayerling* is really no more than a series of aggrandised episodes of adolescent growing pains – but still, with what consequences.



Right, Edward Watson

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On the edge of parody

THEATRE REVIEW

The Letter

WYNDHAM'S THEATRE

Expatriates in Malaysia during the inter-war period had very little to do all day but play bridge, drink cocktails, have affairs and kill their lovers. Somerset Maugham's 1927 melodrama, which includes racism, misogyny and blackmail, was based on a real-life murder in Kuala Lumpur in 1911. "What have I done?" asks the heroine. "You've done what any decent woman would have done in your place," replies a true colonial Brit. She claims she shot a man dead when he tried to rape her. Actually, he was her lover and she shot him because he had a South Chinese mistress.

Alan Strachan's production teeters dangerously on the edge of parody, and it feels like the melodrama could turn into comedy at any moment. The murderer was created by Gladys Cooper and acted by Bette Davis in the 1940 film ("Yes, I'll kill him. And I'm glad I killed him. Glad, Glad, Glad.") Jenny Seagrove, however, is underpowered. Her lawyer (played by an anguished Anthony Andrews) behaves most unprofessionally in order to save her from hanging; but, interestingly, it is not for the sake of a woman he despises, but for the sake of her husband, his best friend. There are much better

Maugham plays – witty, cynical comedies such as *Our Bitters* and *The Circle* – which are waiting to be revived.

Kiss of the Spider Woman

DONMAR THEATRE

First there was the novel by Manuel Puig. Then there was the play with Simon Callow and Mark Rylance. Then there was the movie with William Hurt and Raul Julia. Then there was a vulgar and tasteless musical by John Kander and Fred Ebb in which the political prisoners were suddenly transformed into chorus boys. And now there's a revival of the play.

A Marxist freedom fighter (Rupert Evans) and a homosexual window-dresser (Will Keen) share a prison cell in a South American dictatorship. The homosexual looks after the Marxist when he becomes sick, and the Marxist reciprocates the kindness. Keen, shaven-headed and wearing a pink kimono, is very impressive: perfect in voice and gesture, effeminate but never camp. I prefer the film, which not only has a much better ending, but also has a very funny spoof of a dreadful French Resistance movie.

Absolute Beginners

LYRIC HAMMERSMITH

Colin MacInnis's fame rests on his London trilogy, which deals with teenagers, pop culture, black immigrants and the Notting Hill race

riots. His cult novel, published in 1959, was made into a film musical in 1966.

It seems a bit late in the day to be turning it into a musical. The director, Liam Steel, is more interested in the extraordinary mechanics of the abstract set, which is care about anybody. The characters and their relationships are so poorly developed that it is impossible to care about anybody. The major worry is that Sid Mitchell, who has the leading role of professional teenager and photographer, is going to fall off the set. He is constantly being asked to do things which look pretty dangerous.

Menopause the Musical

SHAW THEATRE

Jeanie Linders's 90-minute musical celebrates hot flashes, night sweats, memory loss and growing old in general. Four women shop in Marks & Spencer belt out pop songs from the 1970s and 1980s. The lyrics have been rewritten to suit their hormonal changes. The show, which is aimed at women of a certain age, may well have a cult following over here. It has been a smash hit round the world, seen by over 8.7 million women in nine countries. Certainly, the female members of the London first night audience accepted with alacrity an invitation to join the cast on stage for a knees-up in an extended curtain call.

Robert Tanitch