

MAIL & GUARDIAN

Friday

October 23 to 29 1998



The president's passenger

Who was driving with Mandela that fateful day in 1962?

A scene from *The Man who Drove with Mandela*, a documentary about Cecil Williams (inset). Photograph courtesy Mark Gevisser. Story on PAGE 3

SAVE THE NAILS



R3W 3/25/18/8

Stop complaining about the Rand. Call Rennie's Travel about the thousands of Rands worth of free Forex we're giving away on selected SAA international flights and you get your Voyager miles too!

Call toll free 0800 110 170 or (011) 407 2800

THE BEST WAY TO GET AWAY

ever, with one of the highlights being a local documentary on a gay activist

The red fag of the Fifties

Renowned cultural writer Mark Gevisser talks to **Matthew Krouse** about his journey to the essence of one of Johannesburg's unique forgotten heroes

In the city of Johannesburg, overrun with live chickens and minibus taxis, Anstey's building retains its stark majesty. Not only because it's a well maintained survivor of the city's New York age, but because — like an aged matriarch — it stands as a harbinger of history.

It was here that the adventurous cream of white society partied till dawn. It was a stone's throw from the great theatres of Commissioner Street, from the original Carlton Hotel and from Joubert Park, where single gentlemen had liaisons after dark.

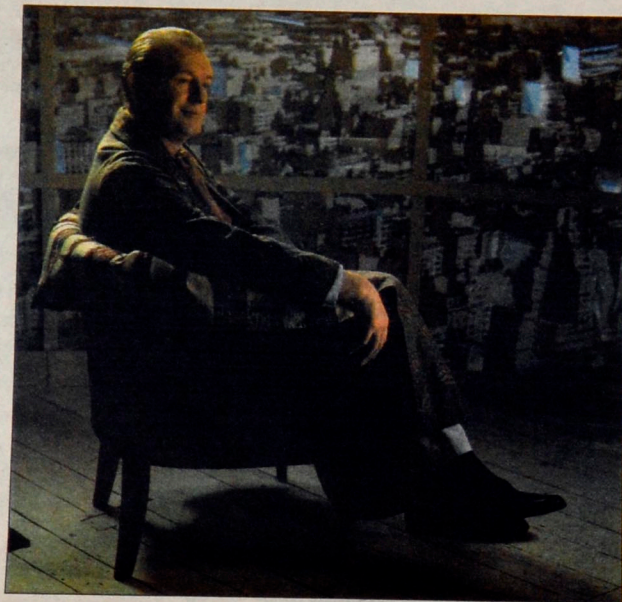
One of Anstey's influential inhabitants was Cecil Williams, the subject of a new documentary, written and researched by renowned writer Mark Gevisser and directed by the American filmmaker, Greta Schiller.

Gevisser has spent the past few years researching Williams, a little known gay figure who resided in Anstey's then-plush surroundings, on its 16th floor. A man who took a heroic stance against injustice, resulting in his playing an important role in the liberation movement of the 1950s.

When the documentary is launched, on October 31, it will no doubt be a milestone in Gevisser's career, and in the annals of the local gay community that has much to learn about its own political and social roots.

Called *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, it's a full portrayal of the life of the late Williams — teacher, theatre director, political activist, and the man arrested with Nelson Mandela one fateful August day in 1962.

Having co-edited *Defiant Desire* in 1994 — an in-depth study of gay and lesbian life on the subcontinent — Gevisser published *Portraits of Power* in 1996 — an essential collection of profiles of influential South Africans, drawn from his acclaimed column in the *Mail & Guardian*. Gevisser then advanced his obsession with history's forgotten gay figures, seeing to fruition the documentary that is due to



Top of the town: Corin Redgrave plays the part of Cecil Williams in his plush art deco Anstey's pad

be aired on television early next year.

Cecil Williams was well-known in the Johannesburg of the Fifties, as a socialite and a successful director of plays that belonged to the great liberal tradition of the earlier part of the century.

He directed some of the country's top actors in their youth, staging contemporary classics in the city's lost and forgotten Library Theatre. One indigenous work remains notable. Called *The Kimberly Train* — directed in 1959 — it was about a love affair across the apartheid divide. In those days, because theatres were segregated, the white actress playing a coloured woman darkened her make-up by a couple of shades.

On the surface of it all Williams was a man-about-town, not one to rock the boat.

This cuts to the core of Gevisser's intrigue: "I find it fascinating," he says, "that you had a man who was, on one level, a society dandy. Everybody knew him. He lived at the top of the Anstey's building. He was a very well known figure in Johannesburg's public and cultural so-

cial life. And yet he had these two subterranean identities. He was gay and he was a communist."

Communist and gay. In those days they were two distinctly different identities, here encapsulated in one man. In the Johannesburg of Williams's day, both were qualities one kept to oneself.

Watching the documentary, one cannot help but share in the mystery. Did Williams's comrades know he was gay? Did his gay friends know the level to which he had integrated himself into the political struggle of the day?

Attempting to answer these questions formed the core of Gevisser's research. "What was so interesting to me, was how completely different sexual and national identity was in the 1950s. It was possible for Williams to put his different identities into different boxes, to keep them there, and to live the kind of life that we might think, from our liberated perspective, is quite oppressive."

The life of an oppressed, white queer of the 1950s was a combination of neo-

colonial leisure, and fear.

Working through the Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Witwatersrand, Gevisser recruited interviews with over 60 members of the older generation of lesbians and gays, and made remarkable discoveries. He received "boxes and boxes of photographs. And from one particular source, the most incredible collection of home movies of Johannesburg in the 1950s."

The secrets were coming out. And Gevisser felt that, if they were discovering the "private history", then somewhere they would find images of the "public history". These he found when his research took him overseas.

Following Williams's tracks through the UK, where he had been exiled until his death, Gevisser encountered veteran activist, Dennis Goldberg, who Gevisser describes as an "obsessive amateur cinematographer". It was from Goldberg that he received some of the rarest images of the Fifties and Sixties, the decisive era in the lives of Williams and Mandela, his chauffeur from 1962.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the project is the manner in which Gevisser came to hear of Williams, in 1990. "I was one of the people involved in organising the 1990 Gay and Lesbian Pride March, and I took on the responsibility of getting a statement of support from the African National Congress. I approached Albie Sachs, because he was on the constitutional committee. In his statement he dedicated the march to the memory of comrade Cecil Williams.

"A couple of years later, Sachs said to me: 'I want you to understand why the older generation of ANC comrades are so receptive to the notion of gay equality in the constitutional debate, you need to go back and look at the role that Williams played.'"

With a *dramatis personae* of some of the country's most well-known veteran activists, and a reenactment of Williams, played by major British actor Corin Redgrave, the documentary is a work of love, war and political intrigue.

It is a statement of gratitude to someone who made a personal sacrifice in opposing the injustices of his day.

The film will premiere at the fifth South African Gay & Lesbian Film Festival. Public screenings will take place in Pretoria on November 5, in Johannesburg on November 7 and in Cape Town on November 14. Call (021) 424-1532