



EARL CAMERON

Sapphire

Followed by a panel discussion with poet and writer Hannah Lowe, writer and broadcaster Kevin Le Gendre, and poet Raymond Antrobus. Chaired by actor Burt Caesar.

Reuniting Cameron with director Basil Dearden after *Pool of London*, and hastened into production following the Notting Hill riots of summer 1958, *Sapphire* continued Dearden and producer Michael Relph's valuable run of 'social problem' pictures, this time using a murder-mystery plot as a vehicle to sharply probe contemporary attitudes to race. Cameron's role here is relatively small, but, playing the brother of the biracial murder victim of the title, the actor makes his mark in a couple of memorable scenes. Like Dearden's later *Victim* (1961), *Sapphire* was scripted by the undervalued Janet Green.

Alex Ramon, bfi.org.uk

Sapphire is a graphic portrayal of ethnic tensions in 1950s London, much more widespread and malign than was represented in Dearden's *Pool of London* (1951), eight years earlier. The film presents a multifaceted and frequently surprising portrait that involves not just 'the usual suspects', but is able to reveal underlying insecurities and fears of ordinary people. *Sapphire* is also notable for showing a successful, middle-class black community – unusual even in today's British films.

Dearden deftly manipulates tension with the drip-drip of revelations about the murdered girl's life. *Sapphire* is at first assumed to be white, so the appearance of her black brother Dr Robbins (Earl Cameron) is genuinely astonishing, provoking involuntary reactions from those he meets, and ultimately exposing the real killer. Small incidents of civility and kindness, such as that by a small child on a scooter to Dr Robbins, add light to a very dark film.

Earl Cameron reprises a role for which he was famous, of the decent and dignified black man, well aware of the burden of his colour. His character is in stark contrast to the gangster caricature of Horace Big Cigar (Robert Adams), or the violent presence of Johnnie Fiddle (Harry Baird). Gordon Heath, a star of stage and screen, gives a scene-stealing performance as dandy Paul Slade.

Despite his intelligent handling of the issues, Dearden is not immune to prevailing prejudices, equating a young woman living alone in London with promiscuity, and seeing an enthusiasm for jazz as evidence of dubious character. The film is littered with casual, unchallenged racism: sexy petticoats found in *Sapphire*'s room are evidence of 'the black under the white'. A landlady justifies evicting *Sapphire* by saying 'Would you be pleased, Inspector, if someone gave you a brass sovereign?'

It is easy to criticise attitudes from a distant past. *Sapphire* was made shortly after the 1958 Notting Hill riots. The film was also on the cusp of the more permissive 60s. As such it is a cultural and social litmus of the age. Though critic Nina Hibbin writing about *Sapphire* in the *Daily Worker* (9 May 1959) expected more from a director signed up to the liberal cause:

‘You can’t fight the colour bar merely by telling people it exists. You have to attack it, with passion and conviction. Commit yourself up to the hilt. Otherwise you’re in danger of fanning the flames.’

Ann Ogidi, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Hannah Lowe is a poet and writer, and lecturer in Creative Writing at Brunel University. Her pamphlet *The Hitcher* (The Rialto, 2011) was widely praised. Her first book-length collection *Chick* (Bloodaxe Books, 2013) won the 2015 Michael Murphy Memorial Prize, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prize and the Seamus Heaney Centre Prize for Poetry, and was selected for the Poetry Book Society’s Next Generation Poets 2014 promotion. This was followed by two pamphlets, *R x* (sine wave peak, 2013) and *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, 2014), and her family memoir *Long Time No See* (Periscope, 2015). Her second full-length collection, *Chan*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2016, followed by a pamphlet, *The Neighbourhood* (Out-Spoken Press) in 2019. Her third full collection, *The Kids* (Bloodaxe Books, 2021), is the Poetry Book Society Choice for Autumn 2021. She has been poet in residence at Keats House, and in 2020 she received a Cholmondeley Award from the Society of Authors.

Kevin Le Gendre is a British journalist, broadcaster and author whose work focuses on Black music. He is deputy editor of *Echoes* magazine, has written for a wide range of publications, including *Jazzwise*, *MusicWeek*, *Vibrations* and *The Independent on Sunday* and is a contributor to such radio programmes as BBC Radio 3’s *J to Z* and BBC Radio 4’s *Front Row*. At the 2009 Parliamentary Jazz Awards Le Gendre was chosen as ‘Jazz Journalist of the Year’. He is the author of *Soul Unsung: Reflections on the Band in Black Popular Music* (2012), *Don’t Stop the Carnival: Black British Music: Vol 1 from the Middle Ages to the 1960s* (2018) and *Hear My Train a Comin’: The Songs of Jimi Hendrix* (2020).

Raymond Antrobus is the author of *Shapes & Disfigurements* (Burning Eye, 2012) *To Sweeten Bitter* (Out-Spoken Press, 2017), *The Perseverance* (Penned In The Margins / Tin House, 2018) and *All the Names Given* (Picador / Tin House, 2021). In 2019 he became the first ever poet to be awarded the Rathbone Folio Prize for best work of literature in any genre. Also in 2019, his poem ‘Jamaican British’ was added to the UK’s GCSE syllabus. Other accolades include the Ted Hughes award, PBS Winter Choice, A *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year award, Somerset Maugham award and The Guardian Poetry Book of the Year 2018, as well as a shortlist for the Griffin Prize and Forward Prize. His poems have been published in *POETRY*, *Poetry Review*, *Lit Hub*, *New Statesman*, *The Deaf Poets Society*, among others. His poetry has appeared on BBC2, BBC Radio 4, *The Big Issue*, *The Jamaica Gleaner*, *The Guardian* and at TedxEastEnd. His debut children’s picture book *Can Bears Ski?* is illustrated by Polly Dunbar and is published in the UK by Walker Books (2021) and in the US/Canada by Candle Wick Press (2020). It was selected as a Ezra Jack Keats honoree winner in 2021.

Burt Caesar is a director and an actor in film and in theatre. His acting credits in film include *The Amnesty Files*, *Scoop*, and *Exorcist: The Beginning*, directed by Paul Schrader. He has directed several film shorts and directed extensively in television drama. Recent TV appearances include in *Unforgotten* and *Death in Paradise*. He has performed in the West End and on Broadway

(*Serious Money*), and at the Royal Court Theatre, National Theatre, Edinburgh Lyceum and Theatre Royal Stratford East amongst others, including in some plays of Shakespeare. He is a former Associate Director at the Royal Court Theatre.

As an educator he has taught/directed at BFI, Rada, Central St Martin’s/UAL, Met Film School, Farnham Film School and elsewhere, plus, in the USA, with Tim Reid’s Legacy Media Institute.

SAPPHIRE

Directed by: Basil Dearden
©: Artna Films Ltd
Presented by: The Rank Organisation
Executive Producer: Earl St. John
Produced by: Michael Relph
Production Manager: Douglas Peirce
Production Controller for Pinewood Studios: Arthur Alcott
Assistant Director: David Orton
Continuity: Tilly Day
Original Screenplay by: Janet Green
Additional Dialogue by: Lukas Heller
Director of Photography: Harry Waxman
Camera Operator: H.A.R. Thomson
Editor: John D. Guthridge
Art Director: Carmen Dillon
Costume Designer: Julie Harris
Make-up: W.T. Partleton
Music by: Philip Green
Title Song Lyrics: Sonny Miller
Title Song Sung by: Jimmy Lloyd
[Music] Played by: Johnny Dankworth and His Orchestra
Sound Recordists: Dudley Messenger, Bill Daniels
Sound Assistant: Harry Fairbairn *
Sound Editor: Arthur Ridout
Sound System: Westrex Recording System
Made at: Pinewood Studios

Cast

Nigel Patrick (*Superintendent Robert Hazard*)
Yvonne Mitchell (*Mildred*)
Michael Craig (*Inspector Phil Learoyd*)
Paul Massie (*David Harris*)
Bernard Miles (*Ted Harris*)
Olga Lindo (*Mrs Harris*)
Earl Cameron (*Dr Robbins*)
Gordon Heath (*Paul Slade*)
Jocelyn Britton (*Patsy*)
Harry Baird (*Johnnie Fiddle*)
Orlando Martins (*barman*)
Rupert Davies (*Jack Ferris*)
Freda Bamford (*Sergeant Cook*)
Robert Adams (*Horace Big Cigar*)
Yvonne Buckingham (*Sapphire Robbins*)
Basil Dignam (*Dr M. Burgess*) *
Peter Vaughan (*plainclothesman Whitehead*) *
Victor Brooks (*Sergeant Newton*) *
Fenella Fielding (*manageress of lingerie shop*) *
Thomas Baptiste *Fay Craig, Fay Sparks (*dancers*) *

UK 1959©
93 mins

* Uncredited

EARL CAMERON
BRITAIN’S FIRST BLACK SCREEN STAR

Sapphire
Tue 10 Aug 20:20 (+ discussion); Sat 28 Aug 13:00
The Fear of Strangers (+ intro) + The Chocolate Tree
Sat 14 July 14:10
Thunder on Sycamore Street + discussion with Actor Ashley Walters
(schedule permitting) and playwright Stephen S Thompson)
Sat 14 Aug 17:30
African Odysseys present: A Warm December
Wed 18 Aug 20:40
Two Gentlemen Sharing
Mon 23 Aug 20:30
Pool of London
Wed 25 Aug 20:50
Flame in the Streets
Sat 28 Aug 17:10

Promotional partners



Season co-curated by actor-director Burt Caesar and the BFI’s Marcus Prince and David Somerset.

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