



NEW RELEASES

Pretty Red Dress

Pretty Red Dress

Directed by: Dionne Edwards

©: Lilly Marvin CD Ltd

The British Film Institute: British Film Institute

British Broadcasting Corporation: BBC

A Teng Teng film

Presented by: BFI, BBC Film

In association with: Magellanic Media Limited

With support from: Great Point Media

International Sales: Protagonist Pictures

Executive Producers: Farhana Bhula, Eva Yates,

Jim Reeve, Robert Halmi, Bennett McGhee

Produced by: Georgia Goggin

Line Producer: Christopher Arcache

Casting Director: Elan Jones

Written by: Dionne Edwards

Screenplay: Dionne Edwards

Director of Photography: Adam Scarth

Editor: Andonis Trattos

Production Designer: Phoebe Platman

Art Director: Olivia Young

Costume Designers: Nirage Mirage, Jayne Hemsley

Hair and Make-up Designer: Gloria Penaranda,

Billie McKenzie

Key Hair Stylist: Shanice Noel

Composer and Musical Director: Hugo Brijis

Production Sound Mixer: Ludovic Lassere

Cast:

Natey Jones (*Travis*)

Temilola Olatunbosun (*Kenisha*)

Alexandra Burke (*Candice*)

Tsemaye Bob-Egbe (*Vivian*)

Chevone Stewart, Katrina Pollard, Misha Malcolm
(*backing singers*)

Carlos Hercules (*drummer*)

Alex Chadwick (*saxophone*)

Winston Rollins (*trombone*)

Izalni Nascimento Jr (*trumpet*)

Jo Wheatley (*offender manager*)

Emeka Sesay (*Nathan*)

Michael Junior Onafowokan (*Emeka*)

Adé Dee Haastrup (*Craig*)

Joshua Blissett (*Steven*)

Temilola Olatunbosun (*Kemisha*)

Eliot Sumner (*Sam*)

Andrea Francis (*Walbury's colleague*)

Edwin De La Renta (*Fletcher*)

Nate Anidugbe (*Jay*)

Baba Oyejide (*Dockey*)

Matthew Jacobs Morgan (*drag queen*)

Rolan Bell (*Clive*)

Darrell Privett (*Paul*)

Basit Ayanwusi (*Tyson*)

UK 2022

110 mins

A BFI release

'Don't be a pussy boy,' Travis (Natey Jones) tells himself as he admires the striking look of a decorative necklace against his throat. Travis has just been released from prison and is trying to settle back into south London life in the flat he shares with his partner Candice (Alexandra Burke) and their teenage daughter Kenisha (Temilola Olatunbosun). The adjustment process is challenging, as you might expect. Kenisha doesn't communicate much and is constantly in trouble at school. Travis, short of work opportunities, finds himself in the awkward situation of working for his big brother Clive (Rolan Bell) at his restaurant, and observing Clive's somewhat flirtatious dynamic with Candice. Candice herself, meanwhile, has landed an audition for a potentially transformative opportunity, playing Tina Turner in a West End musical, but feels frustrated by the responsibilities of caring for both Travis and Kenisha. Then there's the matter of the necklace – or, more broadly speaking, Travis's secret interest in femme glamour, trying out looks behind closed doors using Candice's jewellery, make-up, wigs and clothes. The film takes its title from a pretty red dress the couple find in a vintage shop. Travis buys it, ostensibly for Candice's audition, though it soon becomes evident that he has taken a shine to it himself. As events progress, the dress becomes an object of identification for Kenisha too, though in more convoluted ways that spark both new conflicts and new understandings.

In their feature debut, writer-director Dionne Edwards uses the garment's impact as a device to explore this family's fraught dynamics and the complex web of secrecy, shame, pride, guilt, frustration and desire that the dress comes to stand for. For Travis, its allure represents a kind of gender trouble that he initially doesn't know what to do with, conjuring at once a vision of a self in which he takes more joy and assurance and also a challenge to his conventional masculinity that seems to jeopardise his standing in the eyes of his family, his community and himself. Jones brings a watchful sensitivity to the role, befitting Travis's often passive dramatic position as he tentatively explores who he might in fact be.

For Candice, the dress is an aspirational emblem of potential stardom, a portal to a life of success instead of vexation, where her talents are recognised and rewarded. Burke expresses these aspects potently: as well as delivering several strong musical numbers, the performer's own track record on TV talent competition *The X Factor* has a certain overlap with the gruelling audition process to which Candice is subjected. Olatunbosun, meanwhile, gives a quietly captivating performance, with Kenisha struggling to keep track of Travis and Candice's volatile relationship as well as finding a path to understanding gender and sexuality that is also unconventional in important respects.

Edwards's film is something of a slow burn, taking its time to establish character and environment before its narrative crisis kicks in. The screenplay deftly balances the competing desires, vulnerabilities and insensitivities of its three leads, and is unafraid to let Travis seem weak or Candice intolerant. At times, Candice's conflicting, sometimes contradictory feelings around Travis's gender presentation might feel as confusing to audiences as they do to him, though this is not to say such complexities are unrealistic in situations where desire and repulsion, acceptance and rejection can come into play in confusingly over-lapping ways. It's to the film's credit that it doesn't seek to flatten these challenges, offering excruciating confrontations between its main characters in which blame is not simple to apportion.

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The use of music is key here, with Motown casting a long shadow, not only underpinning Candice's creative and professional hopes but also Travis's journey of self-discovery. Poignantly, a song of self-empowerment starts as rousing support for his experiments in femme presentation but, within the same scene, turns to bitter irony when it continues playing after he is traumatically discovered. The family's Black identity is framed with nuance too, weaving in carefully observed notes around wider family dynamics, local community and the ways in which Candice in particular is shown to be vulnerable to racialised dynamics, whether having to present her Tina Turner to an all-white audition panel or facing quixotic police power in her own home. Travis's gradual moves toward self-acceptance, meanwhile, are framed as a matter of internal subjectivity and expression that can be understood in plain terms that throw bigotry into relief: 'I just like being a bit pretty sometimes.'

Ben Walters, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2023

Director's Statement

The character of Travis came to me in 2014, during a quiet ushering shift at the Hackney Picturehouse. So too came the premise for *Pretty Red Dress*; an ex-drug dealer at a dead-end point in his life who finds joy and freedom through wearing his partner's dress. An otherwise dull shift became more interesting as I considered the tropes of British 'urban' dramas: a man coming home from prison, trying to escape his old environment but quickly finding himself sucked back in. Travis was one of those men seeking to escape the drugs, gangs and violence, but in this film, he was also running from himself, in his truest form.

My short film *We Love Moses* touches on secrets, sexuality and family. *Pretty Red Dress* unintentionally became a continuation of these themes. I developed the story, imagining the effects that Travis's cross-dressing would have on his family and then the characters of Kenisha and Candice came to me. Finally, the Red Dress was born and served as a kind of fantastical catalyst for the characters enabling them each to transform and find freedom. I was never particularly interested in telling a coming out story or explaining the reasons for crossdressing. I wanted the story to be centred around emotion, namely shame, a state that I myself am familiar with. I wanted to ask; *what are the costs of suppressing the deepest parts of ourselves?* As social beings, how do we enact shame on others and how do we enact it on ourselves? When we are concerned with following a prescribed order and worrying about whether or not we fit in, how do we then express who we really are? Travis, Candice and Kenisha are grappling between their projected selves and their authentic selves and pressure one another to perform based on how they see fit. We embark on a journey with each of them as they discover themselves and each other.

Music has always helped me to inhabit a story. I wanted the film to be joyful, symphonic, and exhilarating. Music worked as an emotional catalyst as I explored each character's relationship with the Red Dress. The characters and their everyday experiences were pulled from some of my own memories and interactions as well as my imagination. Their journey and the narrative grounded the film whilst the music and characters' growing desires helped the film to feel intimate and expansive.

I wanted to take an ordinary domestic situation and make it thrilling and cinematic. In the end, I hope we understand the three characters and their motivations more deeply so that we can relate them to our own experiences. I hope audiences will come out feeling looser, freer, and that the film creates room for wider discussions on the idea that we are not one thing. *We are so many things.*

Dionne Edwards, Production notes, March 2022