

## A United Kingdom

A surprise hit of the movie season has been “Hidden Figures,” a modestly budgeted but uplifting picture that tells a 1960’s true story of a victory over racial repression whose actual background few knew about. Now, on its heels, comes a modestly budgeted yet uplifting movie that tells a 1940’s true story of a victory over racism which almost *nobody* knows about. The new release is the moving “A United Kingdom.”

The story turns on the leadership struggle of Seretse Khama, the prince of Bechuanaland (now independent Botswana), a British protectorate surrounded by South Africa. It is 1947 and Khama (David Oyelowo), studying law at Oxford, is informed by his regent uncle that he must return to lead his people. Khama, however, becomes thoroughly smitten by a white English office worker, Ruth Williams (Rosamund Pike). They bond over jazz music and marry after a sweet courtship.

Though scorned by her own family, Ruth agrees to venture to a country she has never known as its newly minted queen. Khama’s bi-racial marriage also does not sit well with the people back in the Bechuanaland capital, Serowe. Khama’s own family, including uncle Tsekeledi (Vusi Kunene) and his younger sister, Naledi (Terry Pheto) are outraged, as are the local British authorities in the protectorate.

Complications ensue when uncle Tsekeledi demands an annulment of the marriage and disowns Seretse, while local authority Rufus Lancaster (Tom Felton) and Sir Alastair Canning (Jack Davenport), the crown representative in the Union of South Africa, look to frustrate Khama’s rule. After Ruth becomes pregnant, Seretse returns to London to make his case, but he is held there by British authorities, then sensitive to protecting their own mineral rights before the new South African apartheid regime, which forbids mixed-race unions. At home, Ruth slowly gains local sympathy and wins over Naledi, while Khama boldly challenges his exile by returning to Serowe and advocates local rule, a prelude to his historic triumph as the first president of an independent Botswana.

David Oyelowo, who pushed this project for some time, is the glue that holds this film together. He’s using a different accent (to note: the actor is splendid with accents) and the backdrop could hardly be more different, but in spirit the part reflects his stirring role as Martin Luther King, Jr. in “Selma” (2014), being almost as inspiring. Also in the inspiring vein, he also matches his recent appearance in “Queen of Katwe” as a Ugandan teacher. Here, Oyelowo is dignified in enduring racial snubs and is rightly passionate when evoking home rule for his Bangwato people. He also proves to be charming and gallant in winning his lady during their London courtship.

Rosamund Pike (last seen by filmgoers as a schemer in “Gone Girl”) is appealing as the naïve Ruth trying to adjust to her newfound environment, but the role is mainly reactive and the actress doesn’t have that much to do—though she is very good at showing apprehension. Davenport is absolutely dastardly as the vile Sir Alastair, swirling his gin-and-tonic while demeaning Khama at every turn. All he lacks is a twirly mustache. South African actress Terry Pheto (“Tsotsi”) convincingly brings trepidation then empathy in the role of Naledi.

In her third feature, Ghanaian-English director Amma Asante, who helmed the well-received “Belle” in 2013, gets full marks for the smooth handling of her bi-cultural cast and for shooting on location in the real Botswana. The flat plains of its carrot-colored soil add much authenticity in grounding “A United Kingdom,” a heartfelt piece of history that’s well to remember.

*(Rated “PG-13,” the film’s running time is 111 minutes.)*

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