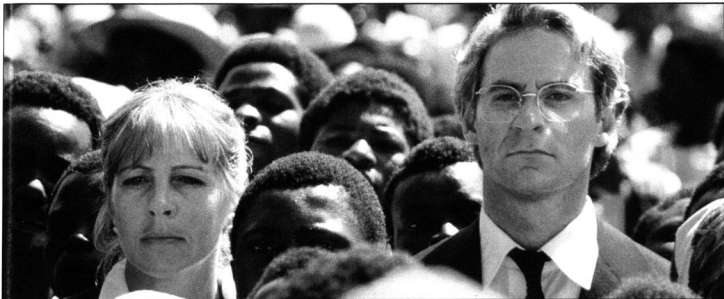


CRY FREEDOM

A STORY OF SOUTH AFRICA



When Sir Richard Attenborough was filming *Gandhi* in Africa, he came to learn about the life and death of Stephen Biko, the young South African black activist. Biko died at the age of 30 in 1977 after being beaten, tortured and ruthlessly interrogated while in the custody of South African security police.

He decided, then and there, to return to Africa to film the life of Biko and the circumstances of his death. And when the time came to make his decision a reality, Attenborough ran into a storm of controversy just as heated as the difficulties which arose from his interpretation of the life of the Indian leader.

They began after the director announced the basis of his story, a book called *Asking for Trouble* by Donald Woods, a former South African newspaper editor. He claimed to have been a close associate of Biko and he fled the country with his family soon after Biko's death.

In South Africa, former colleagues of Biko were critical of the screenplay as being "historically and politically imprecise." The script is by John Briley, who also wrote *Gandhi*. He says that he is aware of the controversy and is satisfied that he has depicted Biko and events, and Woods participation, as accurately as possible.

And so filming began, not in South Africa, but in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) on July 14, 1986, for Universal Films. The budget was \$22 million, seven million of which was contributed by the government of Zimbabwe — not so much for political as economic reasons.

The title of the film was first *Biko: Asking for Trouble*, then *Biko*, then just *Asking for Trouble* and finally, when filming was completed in October, 1986, it became *Cry Freedom*. Attenborough said, before leaving for London, that he had gone to see Biko's mother and his wife, Dr. Namphela Ramphela, who approved of him making the film and were satisfied that he would depict Biko and Woods accurately.

The part of Donald Woods is played by Kevin Kline, the dashing pirate of Penzance in the Broadway musical and film and the star of *The Big Chill* and *Sophie's Choice*. He had just finished playing *Hamlet* in New York when Attenborough called him in. The role of Woods' wife, Susan, is played by Penelope Wilton.

It was in his choice of the actor to play Biko that Attenborough created another storm of protest. He had said that he wanted a black South African to play the role, but after several months searching announced that he could not find one suitable, and chose the American actor, Denzel Washington for the role. Critics claimed that Wash-

ington could not possibly understand or portray the life and background of Biko.

His reply to this, after Attenborough telephoned him to say "You're doing it," was simply "Actors have to act and if the part is well-written it will come out right." Denzel Washington is, of course, the actor best-known perhaps for his role as Dr. Philip Chandler on television's *St. Elsewhere*.

Before leaving for Zimbabwe, Washington told the *New York Times* that, since learning almost a year before that he was under consideration for the role of Biko, he had been preparing in various ways for his portrayal: "It's almost like being back in school doing a research paper. I do a lot of reading. I think that's the main thing — a lot of reading about him, meeting with friends of his, people he went to college with, just basically doing research."

Richard Attenborough and his people are very thorough. They had hours of tape recordings by people who knew Stephen, some inside the country, others who had left. Biko was an intellectual first of all. He was a very complex, very compassionate, very humble man. On all the tapes I've listened to, the people talk about how soft-spoken he was. He had a very pure, analytical mind.

"He was a unique individual who didn't appear to have hatred in his heart. It's almost hard to imagine a black South African not having

some kind of hatred for his enemy. He was a compassionate man who felt that South Africa could work for black and white alike if they would let it work. Sad to say, his enemies weren't as optimistic in their thinking as he was. So he paid the price with his death."

The black-consciousness movement and the anti-apartheid protests continue to grow in South Africa, borne on a tide of political rage against the white supremacist government. Books and articles were written about Biko's death by some of South Africa's leading authors, and a play about the inquest into his death was actually staged in Johannesburg. Now we have the film. But will it ever be shown in South Africa?

Attenborough thinks not, although he would dearly love to have it shown in the hope that it might contribute to a change in conditions there. "I don't feel that the government will wish to have their police shown shooting children in the back, and I won't allow the film to be shown if it is censored."

Cry Freedom is said to be overpowering in its statements and effect. Already, the talk in Los Angeles is that it will be "one of the front runners in the 1987 Academy awards." For the South African government it is a film to be feared.

—Gerald Pratley