

MONITORing The Movies

“CRY FREEDOM”

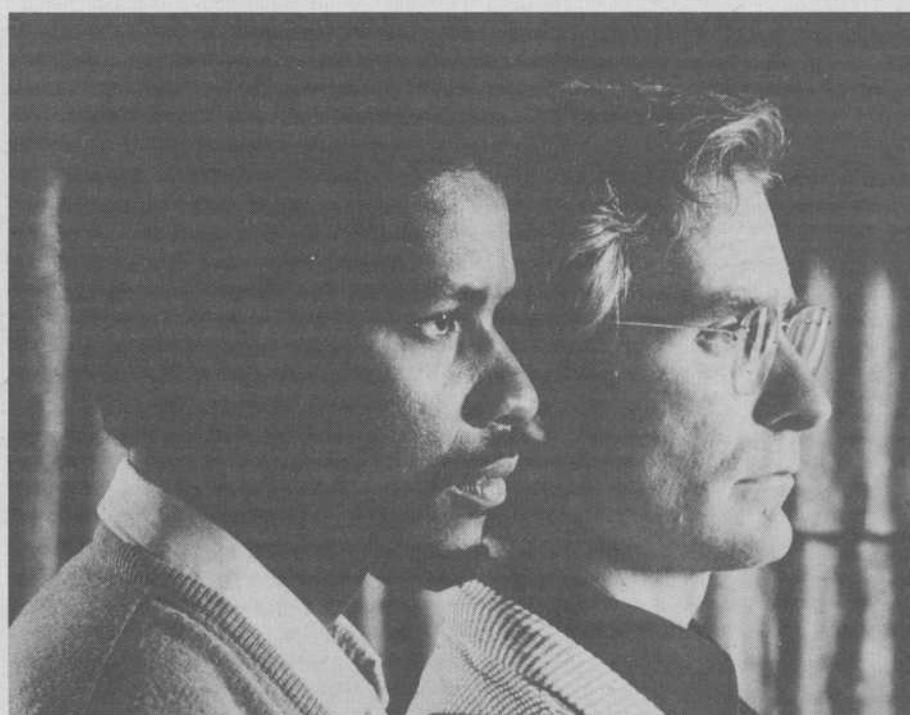
The Story Behind the Motion Picture

In the style of an intimate biography set against epic scenery and historic events which made his “Ghandhi” such a resounding international success, Richard Attenborough’s new film, “Cry Freedom,” is an explosive, emotional and powerful film set in contemporary South Africa. It is based on a true story—so controversial that a government tried to suppress it, police officers tried to deny it and one man and his family risked their lives to expose it.

“Cry Freedom” is also about one of the modern world’s most profound and extraordinary friendships. In the vast and beautiful landscape of South Africa, the two men concerned were virtually neighbors but their lives were worlds apart.

Stephen Biko was young and Black. He lived in a township shack. His was a compelling personality; warm, articulate and compassionate. While attending a university he became a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement which had many parallels with the Black Power Movement and one of its corollaries, the “Black is Beautiful” campaign in the United States. The aim of the movement was to imbue Black people with a sense of positive pride in themselves and their heritage without aid or intervention from well-meaning, liberal-minded Whites.

Such a White man was Donald Woods, whose family had lived in the country for five generations. In his early forties, Woods was the affluent editor of a crusading newspaper. He had grown to hate the government’s policy of apartheid or “separate development,” instituted in 1948, although originally he had been a supporter of this system which enshrined gross discrimination on the basis of skin color in a morass of increasingly repressive legislation.



Danzel Washington stars as Black Consciousness leader Stephen Biko and Kevin Kline as South African journalist Donald Woods.

In 1975, Donald Woods believed that through his newspaper the *Daily Dispatch*, he was effectively playing an enlightened role in the struggle to end apartheid. Then, accepting a challenge, he agreed to meet a Black man, thirteen years his junior, who had been declared a banned person: Bantu Stephen Biko.

Biko was the first Black African Woods had encountered who treated him as an equal. And, by obliging him to re-evaluate his “liberalism,” using friendship and logic, this courageous and charismatic leader proceeded to alter the entire course of the editor’s life.

A persuasive man of peace, Biko undoubtedly also had the potential to sway many more minds and hearts, possibly even helping to avert the bloodbath that

is increasingly predicted for South Africa today. But, on September 12, 1977, having sustained horrific injuries during interrogation by security police, Stephen Biko died. That his name, his ideals, his vision and his life story were not buried together with his broken body is due, in very great measure, to his friend Donald Woods.

Becoming himself the subject of a banning order, harrassed and under constant surveillance by the same security police, Woods decided with his wife, Wendy, that they and their five young children must leave the country. To do so meant abandoning their home, relatives, friends, life savings...everything. All they would take, apart from one bag of belongings, was a manuscript—the journalist’s biography

of Biko, written illegally in secret—which could only be published abroad.

The Woods’ escape, entailing disguise and deception in a nail-biting race against the clock, had all the elements of a fictional thriller.

But the very real penalties for even partial failure could only be measured against the fate of Stephen Biko and that of countless others; many held to this day in South African police detention, without trial, charge, prosecution or evidence.

Biko, the book, which Woods, disguised as a priest, risked his life to smuggle out of South Africa, was published in 1978. Translated into 12 languages, it was—and still is—specifically considered a banned publication by the South African government. Its author’s five-year banning order, imposed in 1977, was renewed *in absentia* during October 1982.

In his second book, the autobiographical *Asking for Trouble* which was published in 1980, Woods wrote about his relationship with Stephen Biko whom he hails as “the most impressive man I have ever met.” He also described what happened after Biko’s death—which lying officials ascribed to a hunger strike—when Woods threw himself and the entire resources of his newspaper behind a campaign to force the authorities to hold an inquest.

It was these two volumes, the biography and the autobiography, which Donald Woods wrapped up with brown paper and many misgivings in 1983. At the suggestion of a mutual friend, he mailed them to Sir Richard Attenborough in the hope he might consider turning them into a movie.