

#BFIBLACKSTAR

Bullet Boy (15)

Mon 21 Nov 2016, 18.20

Part of: Black British Breakthroughs

Dir Saul Dibb / 2004 GB / 87 mins

Ashley Walters, Luke Fraser, Leon Black

Ashley Walters was, for a time, a double figure in Britain: the symbol of a crisis among young black men *and* the promise of redemption – for both the gun-toting hoodies and the society that had failed them. His own improbable zig-zag from stage-school, to bad-boy emcee Asher D in *So Solid Crew*, to prison for possession of a firearm, to a successful acting career (in particular as tragic protagonist Ricky here in *Bullet Boy*) was in stark contrast to the procession of troubled youth whose lives ended at gunpoint, or knife-point, or in custody. In the early part of this century, gun crime was a media sensation, and *Bullet Boy* was a singular, if not untroubled, response hinged on the tricky history of its lead.

Set on the Lower Clapton Estate in Hackney, the film concerns two brothers: twelve-year-old Curtis (Luke Fraser) and eighteen year-old Ricky who has just left prison and wants to move on with his life. He is collected by his headstrong best friend and worst influence Wisdom (Leon Black), with his truanting younger brother in tow. What at first seems to be a touching reunion – Wisdom sports a large scar on his neck, testament to the bravery that saved Ricky's life – goes rapidly downhill when Wisdom smashes someone's wing mirror and refuses to pay. Unfortunately – predictably – that someone is a man as violent and stubborn as himself. Ricky de-escalates the situation, but word spreads that they backed down, and Wisdom becomes hell-bent on showing he's the big man. Ricky's loyalty in the face of needless point-scoring mirrors his younger brother's loyalty to him; eventually all three are caught in a trap in which the strength of their relationships is also the ballast that keeps them down.

As tensions on the estate rise, Curtis's future darkens as his curiosity about Ricky's hidden gun intensifies. Like a set of spinning plates, Ricky's loyalty to his best friend is again mirrored in Curtis, who lets his friend, Rio, get the better of him. In a haunting scene, the two boys walk into a field and fire at a white horse before running away, frightened and exhilarated by their own power. Moments later, Curtis holds Rio's life in the cross-hairs of a gun he can barely hold. Later, when he visits Rio in hospital, the latter says "You owe me big time", and so we see the cycles of friendship, violence and loyalty re-played.

The innocence of both boys is lost, not in the shadows and street lights of urban East London, but in its ragged fringes. This is an environment of fields, canalside walks and sequestered woodland, punctuated by government housing and oil slicks of urban street culture. This location, combined with Marcel Zyskind's salty palette and an airy arthouse edit lift the story's visual soul away from sensationalist peril, by locating the film in the realist tradition of British filmmaking. Though there is little commentary on the socio-political interstices these boys inhabit, the film's aesthetic pays homage to class-conscious filmmaking. However there is little beyond that to suggest a true embodiment of class politics or concern for those whose lives are blighted by gun violence and the broader social context that incubates it. The storytelling is pitch-perfect, melodic even, but to borrow from the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, it is a single story – true, but incomplete.

#BFI BLACK STAR

Writing in the Guardian in 2005, Akin Ojumo said “the film-makers have taken the template of a classic tragedy and superimposed it over a modern, urban story”, which might be the best way of understanding the conflicted appeal of *Bullet Boy*. The tidy symmetry of the story does not exorcise its many cliches, nor absolve it of doing what so many films about young black men do, which is to spin troubling social issues into box-office gold. Director Saul Dibb (who started out as a documentary filmmaker, after his father Mike Dibb) stated that he wanted to make a film that was “not without hope”, and that hope is embodied by Curtis, whose mother, Beverley (Clare Perkins) literally forces Ricky out of the house – and possibly to his death – in order to save her younger son. The problem is shown as both beginning and ending within this small community in which the boys are without fathers, direction or social imagination; the women are mothers or sexual b-roll; there is no word about why things are the way they are; and little story beyond whether one black boy has the capacity to kill another.

Unlike his character, Walters broke out of this cycle and into the British mainstream; his story is a greater imaginative leap than the one he acts out. He credits his turn-around to religion (something his fictional mother also turns to in the film), which he embraced in prison. And it is this story which has given him the edge, adhering as it does to the irresistible narrative of the prodigal son. Walters was lost, then found. The pressure of incarceration created a diamond – possibly because his own hard-working family had provided the materials for success. And it is this alchemical fluke – his ability to transmute from crackhead to policeman, playboy to musketeer, prisoner to star – that intensifies his allure.

Bullet Boy's neat composition and warm critical reception no doubt plays into Dibb's recent appointment to direct the BBC adaptation of Zadie Smith's *NW*. Viewers must decide for themselves what they think about the snarling working class black characters therein, and what it means for another important black British story to be handled by Dibb. It is hard to fault *Bullet Boy* on any technical level: the performances are genuine, the relationships moving, and the soundtrack – Massive Attack plus well-chosen reggae – buoys the film along. But in the history of black British stories on screen, *Bullet Boy*'s importance is as much for the discomfiting questions it raises about its own production and the culture that enabled it, as its attempt to tell an authentic story.

By Jay Bernard, Poet, Writer and Film Programmer for the BFI Flare Festival
jaybernard.co.uk

Part of the BFI Black Star season, taking place UK-wide, supported by Film Hub North West Central, part of the Film Audience Network, awarding funds from the National Lottery.