

Sapphire

UK | 1959 | 92 minutes

Credits

Director Basil Dearden
Screenplay Janet Green, Lukas Heller
Photography Harry Waxman
Music Philip Green

Cast

Superintendent Robert Hazard	Nigel Patrick
Inspector Phil Learoyd	Michael Craig
Mildred	Yvonne Mitchell
David Harris	Paul Massie

In Brief

A pregnant girl, initially assumed to be white, is murdered. As two detectives start to investigate, and discover her racial origins were much more mixed, public prejudices and those of the officers themselves are exposed. Dearden has earlier explored race issues with *Pool of London* (1950).



The soundtrack of Basil Dearden's racially-charged 1959 cop-flick *Sapphire*, composed by Philip Green but arranged by the great Johnny Dankworth in a sleazy jazz style reminiscent of *Taxi Driver*, comments on shocking turns in the action in the traditional manner, with excited blasts at key moments. But the decisions about what is actually supposed to be shocking are pretty interesting, and convey all kinds of sublimated panic.

A young white woman is found stabbed on Hampstead Heath. Her brother (Earl Cameron) arrives at the police station to give evidence. He is black.

BA-DAAA! The music blares out in horror. Not just at the appearance of a non-white character, but at the meaning behind this — miscegenation has occurred, at some distant time in the past, and a black girl has passed herself off as white.

Police examine the murdered girl's clothing. Respectable outer garments, racy red undies beneath. "There's the black under the white," remarks racist copper Michael Craig.

Later, in her bedroom, detectives break into a locked drawer. As it opens, more voluminous red satin underwear bursts out.

BA-DAA! The music goes into a shocked paroxysm at this explosion of erotic lingerie. The police try to figure out how to trace the panties to their source (for no obvious reason, they are seized on as a vital clue) and the music slowly turns sexy and saxy, getting to quite like the idea of frilly knickers now that it's over the shock.

Film stillThe weird thing is, *Sapphire* is a progressive movie for its day, using the format of the whodunit and police procedural to look at racial attitudes across British society at a time when immigration had become a big talking point. Dearden's *Victim*, a superior film, would use a crime story to examine British attitudes to homosexuality, and achieve a lot in terms of consciousness-raising, censorship-loosening and eventually doing its bit towards getting the law changed to decriminalise homosexual acts. Whatever Dearden's knowledge of gay activity in Britain was, he seemed able to achieve a level of conviction that rather escapes him in *Sapphire*. Perhaps



because the presence in the cast of actors like Dennis Price and Dirk Bogarde helped set the tone. *Sapphire* features numerous black actors, but apart from Massie, most of them had little film experience and little acting experience of any kind. It also feels like they don't have the authority to insist on authenticity, so that they are forced to utter weird Americanised dialogue (by Dirty Dozen scribe Lukas Heller). The film's suppression of authentic West Indian accents (only a couple are heard, well into the film) also acts against a sense of a reality, although a bonus is to be had in the stereotype-defying spectacle of an exceedingly posh black barrister, with a bishop for a dad. But this character proves to be a habitué of sleazy jazz dives, drives a flash car, and has a girlfriend who talks like she's from Harlem, so it's uncertain if the film is hinting that his respectable facade conceals a set of inherently non-Caucasian vices.



An equally dubious moment occurs in *The Tulip*, where the proprietor boasts that his club's bongo rhythms unleash a wild side in his patrons that separates the black from the white — and behind him, a curvy blonde on a barstool starts to twitch her feet to the music, revealing her African blood.

Even if the film's racial attitudes are a mixed bag, Craig's racist cop is shown to be misguided, but no alarm is expressed at the fact that he holds those opinions and that job — it may be partly because the plot is too. Dearden scored an early success with sections of the compendium horror film *Dead of Night* (there's an expressionistic side to his work that contradicts the more naturalistic flavour) and followed that with parts of *Train of Events*, and he seems to have favoured sprawling, multi-character narratives. Here, there's the domestic whodunnit, with its secrets and lies, different family members suspecting each other (*Sapphire* was engaged to a white music student, and his bigoted family opposed the match); the police procedural, with Nigel Patrick crisply

efficient in a role that's not so much underwritten as completely unwritten; and the social study, with racist landlords and London's Afro-Caribbean night-life under examination. It's enough for two or three better films.

About halfway in, Dearden cuts loose with a nocturnal chase, as new suspect Johnny Fiddle goes on the run through a noir city that's all blue backlight blasting in great shafts from behind every building, a *Third Man* kind of look that's very typical of Dearden — he stages such chases in nearly all his thrillers. In *Sapphire*'s lurid Eastmancolor, the effect is more hallucinatory: the night is as searing as the day. As sequences like the climax of *Dead of Night* (surreal nightmare attack) and the carnival in *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (choreographed baroque phantasmagoria) show, Dearden had a command of the expressive power of cinema that he was rarely allowed to exercise. *Sapphire*'s night-flight hints at a weirder, more exotic film that could have slipped into *Black Orpheus* territory.

By making the transition from Ealing dramas like *The Blue Lamp* (a rather genteel detective story) to '60s social realism flicks like *A Place to Go* (Rita Tushingham and Myra Breckinridge wreck Mike Sarne), Dearden showed a great deal of adaptability (he also tried his hand at Lean's brand of epic, with *Khartoum*, and made a jazz *Othello*, under the title *All Night Long*, which is most notable for allowing Miles Davis and Dickie Attenborough to share screen time). *Pool of London*, another multi-character panoply of Britain, wrapped up in a crime thriller, made in 1951, is a more successful look at race relations. It stars the spanner-faced, fast-talking yank Bonar Colleano, and Earl Cameron, a likeable black actor in a rather neutered role: but when Cameron finally snaps under the pressure of the relentless racist attitudes around him and goes on a drunken bender, he “confirms” the prejudices of his persecutors, and it's quite powerful stuff. The persecutors are entirely working class, however, and the film is careful to avoid suggesting that the same thoughtless inhumanity might be present among the British police. (See the film for Cameron's drunk scene and the climax, involving Max Adrian, improbably cast as a criminal acrobat.)

Even if Dearden is a broadly sympathetic social observer, in *Sapphire* he fails to convince us of the veracity of his black London. The inexperience and awkwardness of the black actors needn't have been an insuperable problem: several players have charm and grace, but they're saddled with unsuitable dialogue and attitudes, and unfairly contrasted with seasoned British professionals who sometimes appear stuffy by comparison, but own their lines in a way most of the black actors cannot — what was needed was for them to be empowered to rephrase the dialogue into their own words.

Worst acting honours go to Paul Massie, however, as *Sapphire*'s white fiancée: he gives a constipated interpretation of a working class English boy with a Canadian accent. This is where the film really has no excuse for getting it wrong. And the other moment that might inspire rage is the fleeting, uncredited appearance by Barbara Steele — how one longs for the film to simply abandon its narrative and follow her sexy adventures as a music student in dawn-of-the-sixties unswinging London.

David Cairns Shadowplay film blog

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