

Injustice -- Black Filmmaker Magazine, September 2001

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Brian Douglas died from a severe blow to the head. Roger Sylvester died after being restrained on the ground by eight men. Joy Gardener died of asphyxiation after her head was bound with thirteen feet of tape. Harry Stanley died after being shot twice. Ibrahima Sey died from asphyxiation after being repeatedly restrained, and sprayed with CS gas.

All of these people were innocent civilians, killed by British police officers while in their custody, in the police stations of Stoke Newington, Forest Gate, and Brixton, among others. Although inquests into several of the deaths returned verdicts of unlawful killing, no police officers have ever been convicted. In fact, no police officer has ever been convicted after a death in custody in Britain. A new documentary, *Injustice*, by Ken Fero and Tariq Mehmood, uncovers these cases, and goes further, detailing the aftermath of deaths in custody, and their impact upon the families of victims.

On September the tenth, 2001, several hundred people attended a sold out screening of the documentary, playing as part of the BFM film festival at the Curzon Soho. The importance of this event becomes clear when we realise that previous screenings of the movie had been unsuccessful due to threats to cinema owners from police lawyers threatening libel action. There was no legal basis to halt the screenings of the film, as Ken Fero made clear after the screening, but the weight of the police and their representatives was enough to intimidate most of the cinema owners scheduled to show the film. Watching *Injustice*, in a multicultural audience spanning age groups, it was easy to see why the police are so threatened by this film. At the core of *Injustice* is the casual indifference displayed by the police and the authorities towards human life and towards the lives of people of colour in particular. Each case reiterates the same depressing turn of events - no apology is given for the death, and instead the victim is portrayed as an easy stereotype: a drug dealer, or mentally ill and uncontrollable. The officers involved in the killing of Shiji Lapite described him as "the biggest, strongest, black man" they had ever seen. Yet Ibrahima was 5'10", of a medium build, and sustained injuries to 40 areas of his body, while the officers involved sustained only minor injuries (a bite mark and a scratched finger). The families of the victims are shown little respect in their grieving, having to fight to obtain the bodies of their loved ones for burial, their medical reports, and most of all, the truth behind their deaths.

Again and again the Crown Prosecution Service have denied the need for a trial of the police officers involved despite the verdicts given in the inquests into the deaths. It's this frustration that led to the families of many victims setting up The United Families and Friends Campaign in 1995. In the families of the victims we find some of the most inspiring human courage and determination possible, as they mobilise campaigns to search for witnesses or the murder of their loved ones, organise demonstrations, and lobby for support. As Brenda Weinberg, Brian Douglas' sister, says, it is impossible to "grieve unless the system does its job." The United Families and Friends Campaign are trying to make the system do just that.

At the Curzon Soho, it was possible to feel the audience's anger and grief. Many engaged verbally with the film. There were gasps of horror as pictures of the victims' injuries were shown, shouts of agreement as the families articulated their need for justice, and sighs of derision when the testimonials of the police did not add up to the facts. At the end of the movie, many members of the audience were crying. There was certainly a well of support as the filmmakers and several members of the United Families and Friends Campaign took to the stage. *Injustice* is a film that speaks to the disenfranchised, the silenced, and those denied justice and truth. It is without doubt a highly important film, and one that resonates long after the closing credits. After the screening, Fero described the film as a historical document'. On leaving the cinema, rather than a sense of despair, there was a feeling of hope. The silenced had been heard, and if this is possible, then we have to believe that so is the struggle for justice.