

Movie Review - The King's Speech

Written by {ga=mitch}

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Oscar preview week continues with a look at the presumptive favorite at this point to win Best Picture; the British period piece “The King’s Speech”.

This was another one of those movies where I went into the theater with a slight feeling of dread. I had visions in my head of other “haughty” British films such as “Atonement”, “The English Patient”, “The Wings of the Dove”, “Sense and Sensibility” and the like, and was hoping that I could stay awake through it all. On the other hand, the last movie done about the House of Windsor was the exquisite “The Queen”, so I did have a bit of hope as well.

Hope wins out in this case. There is very little “hautiness” in “The King’s Speech”, other than the way royalty can sometimes act, and that tendency is actually somewhat derided when it shows up. What we do have is a film that works on many different levels, with superlative performances from some of the top actors in Hollywood.

The title itself has two meanings. The first is about the way the King speaks; and it is painful to listen to. Prince Albert, second in line to the throne of King George V, has a horrible stammer. We see this at the very beginning of the film, as Albert gives a live speech at the opening of the

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British Empire Exhibition in 1925. It was atrocious, and you could see the discomfort not only on the faces of the actors onscreen, but also in the audience of the theater I attended. Every time he would stutter over a phrase, you could audibly hear people trying to finish the word for him.

Not content to rely on the quacks that have been trying to treat her husband, and unwilling to accept his condition as permanent, Albert's wife Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother), steps out of convention. She shows up at the offices of a speech therapist named Lionel Logue, a failed Australian actor. Logue's methods and demeanor are unconventional at best, even after Elizabeth drops her façade and he sees that he's not treating an average aristocrat, but a member of the Royal Family. It doesn't matter to Logue: He insists on calling the prince by his family nickname "Bertie" and not as "His Royal Highness", and goads Albert into methods and exercises that no one else would dare to suggest to someone of his status.

The other meaning of the title concerns the speech made by King George VI in 1939. Britain was entering into the war with Germany, and the people needed firm, clear leadership and resolve from their monarch. The country is on the precipice, and who knows what would have happened to the psyche of the people if the King had totally botched this important speech? I know that may sound somewhat melodramatic, but you need to remember the times and the power of radio at that time. Think of FDR's fireside chats and the positive influence it had in calming and assuring the American people that they would soon get out of the despair of the Great Depression.

Another concern I had going in was that this would simply be a movie where the main character goes in with a specific problem, a doctor helps him with it (with a few setbacks along the way), and in the end the good guy is cured. But it is much more than that. The film also gives a detailed account of Albert as a man; emotionally damaged by a domineering father who felt his only duty to his sons were to make sure they were ready to step in as King someday. Nasty George V (Michael Gambon) knows deep down that Albert would be a better king than his older brother Edward, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

Until Wallis Simpson comes along, and the smitten Edward (Guy Pearce) could not give a crap about the crown at that point, so committed he was to marrying the soon-to-be divorced for the second time American socialite. Edward is portrayed as a spoiled young man who would have been a total disaster had he not abdicated the throne shortly after his coronation.

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It was an interesting decision by the screenwriter David Seidler to emphasize his inadequacies as just a character flaw, and totally ignore another documented point about Edward; he was very sympathetic to Hitler, which would have been very embarrassing had he retained the crown.

Instead, Seidler and director Tom Hooper reserve their venom, in true British fashion, for the slutty American Simpson, who is shown as an absolutely brainless gold digger. Take that; USA. (Personally, I can deal with this...from all historical accounts, Wallis WAS the Paris Hilton of her time).

The soul of the film is Colin Firth, and he delivers an amazing performance as George VI, showing all the pain and frustration over his affliction, guilt and anxiety over the transgressions of his beloved older brother, deep friendship and appreciation to Lionel Logue, and love and tenderness to his wife and two young daughters, one of whom of course becomes Queen Elizabeth II. Many people feel that Firth should have won the Oscar for Best Actor last year for his remarkable acting in "A Single Man", and I can see their point. But that was last year: This year, it's almost a certainty that he will win, and I wholeheartedly agree with the majority.

Equal praise needs to go to Geoffrey Rush as Lionel Logue; it is a part that Rush seems to have been born to play. Logue is a complete rascal, but one who you pull for at every step, even when you would swear that he's about to be hauled off to the Tower of London for his impertinence. Logue always acts 100% positive of his methods and actions, but you can see in his face that he is also filled with doubt, but doubt of what? It takes a while for that part of it to work itself out, and it does so in a very satisfactory way.

Helena Bonham Carter has spent so much recent time playing over-the-top characters ("Harry Potter", "Alice in Wonderland", "Sweeny Todd") that I had forgotten that she is a very talented dramatic actress. No over-acting in this film; she gives Elizabeth the exact balance of dogged determination and unending love and support that the character requires. Not very splashy, but exactly what was needed.

I mentioned "The Queen" earlier in my review, and that is probably the best comparison that can be made for this film in terms of taking real life people who live in a world none of us can truly understand, and presenting it to us in a manner that educates us, enlightens us, and entertains us. But this one is better. There is real humanity in these individuals, and the true life tale of the unusual friendship between the King of the vast British Empire and a lowly commoner from

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Australia, one that lasted up until the King's death in 1956, is certainly deserving of winning the Oscar for Best Picture.

My Rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)