The Queen

Produced by Christine Langan, Tracey Seaward and Andy Harries; directed by Stephen Frears; screenplay by Peter Morgan; cinematography by Affonso Beato; production design by Alan MacDonald; edited by Lucia Zucchetti; costumes by Consolata Boyle; original music by Alexander Desplat; starring Helen Mirren, Michael Sheen, James Cromwell, Sylvia Syms, Ale Jennings, Helen McCrory, Roger Allam, Tim McMullan. Color, 103 mins. A Miramax Films release.

In October of 1940, the year that director Stephen Frears was born, fourteen-year-old Princess Elizabeth comforted an agonized nation on a radio broadcast of "The Children's Hour," assuring her youthful public of the compassion and empathy of the Royal Family: "Thousands of you in this country have had to leave your homes and be separated from your fathers and mothers. My sister Margaret Rose and I feel so much for you, as we know from experience what it means to be away from those we love most of all." A little more than a decade later, in 1953, the year of Queen Elizabeth's formal coronation (she had acceded to the throne a year earlier upon her father King George's death), future Prime Minister Tony Blair came into the world, the only Prime Minister ever to have been born during her reign. These facts, while never explicitly referenced in Frears's majestic, multifaceted, and surprisingly funny epic, *The Queen*, are nonetheless essential to the brilliant and complex interweaving of myth, media, politics, and power that forms the core of this eminently human film.

As everyone knows by now (even those who have seen only the ads), *The Queen* is a film about the people of Great Britain in the week following the tragic and unexpected death of Princess Diana in a car crash in Paris; more significantly, it is about the Royal family coming to terms with a new media-driven definition of monarchy and the political challenge invoked by newly-elected, image-savvy Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair. One aspect of the film's complexity involves its dual focus on both the monarchy and the government, illustrated by the relationship between the Queen and the Prime Minister, a strategy that prevents the film from being a conventional biopic with Masterpiece Theater trappings. While the film provides a very human dimension to the Queen as a person, it both maintains a relatively ironic distance from the royal family as an institution and allows as much time to Blair as it does to Her Majesty.

Diana's death was an unprecedented national trauma with unimaginable implications for the State. Yet, amid all of the disbelief, anger, and confusion, the conspiracy theories, the demonizing and mythologizing swirling around the death of the most photographed woman in history, the film manages to reinsert the human factor in all of its messy complexity. It does this by means of a glimpse into ordinary lives in extraordinary circumstances (the tremendous and heterogeneous mourning populace appealing directly to the Queen, the banal chaos of the Prime Minister's breakfast table) and extraordinary lives in ordinary circumstances (royalty padding around in bathrobes watching television, questions of sovereignty considered in a Land Rover), as well as by means of a complex and sophisticated look at the politics of popular spectacle. Along the way *The Queen* restores a sense of compassion and human connection that the events it depicts might seem to deny, while compelling performances remind us that there are many stories beneath the finely crafted public appearances. Yet there is a healthy dose of humor and irony in this very witty film, adding a real texture to the humanity of the royals without abandoning the astute political observations that give the film its critical edge.

Almost classical in its structure (unity of time, place, and action), *The Queen* concerns the single week occurring between the shocking moment of Diana's death and her movingly ceremonial funeral in Westminster Abbey, meticulously timed by titles that tick off the days, one by one. An expository prologue three months earlier and something of a coda two months after the events, each involving a meeting between Queen Elizabeth (the indescribably powerful Helen Mirren) and Tony Blair (disarmingly eager, like a friendly puppy, as played by Michael Sheen) at Buckingham Palace, trace a transformation in their relationship sparked by the events of the week after Diana's death. Both the Queen and her tenth Prime Minister have redefined the Monarchy—and themselves—in contemporary terms. As for Elizabeth II herself, we will feel, through the course of the film, as if we've come to know this Royal icon as a complex, vulnerable, empathetic, and supremely intelligent human being, and conversely, we will be made to understand the incredible demands of sovereignty that so exceed the mere individual. Director Frears sums it up quite succinctly, with the wry humor that abounds in the film: "While the institution is idiotic and inappropriate, the woman is extraordinary." And it is this dialectic of affection for the Queen and skepticism toward the monarchy that leads Frears to further comment that the film tells "a symbolic story, because it says a lot about my country, which is divided between tradition and modernity." He points out that it "speaks of a conflict that brings the two worlds face to face, as well as a tradition that is both the country's strength and weakness."

But even before the film's title appears on the screen, we are given two elements that transcend the material time frame and remind us of eternity. The words, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (*Henry IV, Part 2*) invoke the Shakespearean atmosphere that permeates the film. The Queen is sitting for a formal portrait, as a television report showing enthusiastic Labor posters just prior to the election sparks a conversation between the Queen and her portraitist. Elizabeth says she would like the experience of casting a vote, just once, "for the sheer joy of being partial," while the painter replies, "Well Ma'am, it *is* your government"—an exchange that initiates the film's 'official' beginning. A musical flourish from Alexander Desplat's magnificent soundtrack accompanies an upward pan of the Queen seated in formal regalia. As the film's title, '*The Queen*,' appears on the black screen behind her, Elizabeth turns in full close-up and looks directly at the camera (and thus the spectators). And this, in fact, provides the controlling metaphor of the film: this

Helen Mirren stars as Queen Elizabeth in Stephen Frear's *The Queen*.

image will come to life, will address us on an intimate level, and will make us experience the complicated human realities and contradictions involved in being both public image and private person. It also reminds us, right from the start, that portraiture in our time is less a matter of paint than of celluloid.

One way the film reveals these realities and contradictions is through its behind-the-scenes account of activities in two competing corridors of power—the vibrantly modernizing maneuvers of a hugely popular Baby Boomer Prime Minister and the centuries-old traditions of established regal protocol and custom—each attempting to deal with the unprecedented public grief evoked by Diana's death. While we are given numerous examples of Blair's uncanny ability to capture and mediate the national sentiment through the appropriate technology, the bulk of the conflict is played across the person of the Queen in her most haunting private moments and inner struggles.

In order to achieve what must ultimately be a fictional account of actual events, screenwriter Peter Morgan (cowriter also of *The Last King of Scotland*) drew from extensive research, media publications, interviews (both on and off the record), actual public figures and private assessments, news footage, and other sources to interweave the imagined and the real into a believable texture of history. He was intrigued by what he calls "this global sharing moment through television," which was at once unflinchingly public and devastatingly personal, and for this reason the film gives television a central role. We are constantly reminded of the mediated nature of what we take for reality, as the repeated intercutting of footage from BBC World News, CNN, ITV, GMTV, and global news organizations relays to the Royal family, the Blairs, advisors on both sides, the depicted public, and, of course to us, the viewers, the tumultuous history (in familiar, iconic images) leading up to the crash, and the halting but inevitable progress toward an appropriate and respectful homage to the Princess of Wales.

The film has availed itself of a team eminently qualified to tell this story. Producers Christine Langan and Andy Harries, along with director Frears and screenwriter Morgan, had already made *The Deal*, a 2003 Channel 4 British television drama that provided a revealing look at Tony Blair's assumption of leadership of the Labor Party that led to his landslide election as Prime Minister. A gifted filmmaker uncannily attuned to the often invisible nuances of human experience (his credits include *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, *The Grifters*, *Prick Up Your Ears*), Frears teamed up with Morgan when Langan and Harries approached him with a second project about another British institution, the Royal Family. They turned to Diana's death, which, according to Langan "was an obvious choice... Diana had been a great cause of

The man with the cheshire-cat grin: Michael Sheen as Tony Blair in *The Queen*.

tension while she was alive; it was inevitable that her death would present the Monarchy with perhaps its biggest challenge of the past 50 years." Langan goes on to say that the crisis around Diana's death unexpectedly provided the brand-new and as yet untested Blair government with an opportunity to assert itself in a dramatic way, leading to what she calls the "heart" of the story, "the unique relationship that developed... between the Prime Minister and the Queen." At the same time it is also about Tony Blair's own transformation from a brashly smug and popular modernizer ("Will someone please save these people from themselves!," he says in exasperated reference to the sluggish response of the Royals) to someone who defends the Queen from easy ridicule ("She's given her whole life to the people of this country in a job that killed her father!," he chides his spin doctor and associates). In this way the shining knight of modern England becomes a tempered statesman who respects the wisdom of his Sovereign and the seriousness of the decisions to be made amid the shifting currency of public popularity.

Much of the film is taken up with an endless relay of telephone conversations (inspired by newspaper headlines and angry or cynical advisors) between an increasingly anxious Blair and his Sovereign, as demand for some sign of public grief by the Windsors reaches near hysteria. One afternoon his call disturbs her at her Balmoral retreat: "[Some visible display of Royal mourning] would be a great comfort to your people," he ventures tentatively, to which an intransigent Queen replies, "This is a family funeral, Mr. Blair. Not a fairground attraction. The children have to be looked after," invoking a combination of behavior honed by centuries of royal comportment and the familial ties she is sometimes accused of ignoring. Continuing the response—in spite of her agitated husband, Prince Philip (a delightfully imbecilic James Cromwell), who complains, "Bloody fool [referring to Blair]. Now your tea's gone cold!"—she moves between the public persona, steeped in tradition, and the private woman, absorbed in her grief, settling on the regal public image that she has carefully crafted for most of her life. She calls for "a period of restrained grief and sober private mourning...Quietly, with dignity," adding that this is "what the rest of the world has always admired us for."

Later, when it is apparent that an unavoidable national crisis is at hand, Blair risks propriety and oversteps his position as he tells her, "One in four are now in favor of abolishing the monarchy. I advise the following...", provoking one of the signature images of the film, something that makes its humanizing view of Royalty so compelling. On being interrupted from walking her prized Corgis on the grounds of Balmoral, Queen Elizabeth answers Blair's phone call in the castle's kitchen, kerchief on head and surrounded by English country culinary paraphernalia. The very next shot shows her upstairs in the estate's corridor, knocking on the door of the Queen Mother (a hilariously tipsy, doddering Sylvia Syms): "Mummy!" A quick cut to the garden, where now mother and daughter are seen strolling, allows us a glimpse of a very intimate moment, while the subject of the conversation is anything but. As Elizabeth enumerates Tony Blair's emphatic suggestions, including her return to London and a live television statement, she observes, "There's been a shift in values. Maybe it is time to hand it over to the next generation." The Queen Mum responds, with a gravitas that belies her legendary cocktail-swilling joviality, reminding her daughter that she's "one of the greatest assets this institution has" in its "unbroken line for more than a thousand years." With a sparkle of the wit that forms a significant part of the film's appealing texture, she chirps, "Silly Mr. Blair with his Cheshire cat grin!"

When Queen Elizabeth finally does make her televised address to the nation, Frears and Morgan's film is at its peak of historical accuracy, as history and fiction merge. The public image is exactly as we remember it, while the inner conflict that led up to it has been carefully and sensitively exposed. The Queen is attended to by cameramen and makeup artists, her attire is appropriately tailored according to convention, and as she ascends the dais, there is a sense of finality and accomplishment. While there will always remain speculation concerning whether or not the words are entirely her own (and the film remains rather ambiguous here), the clarity of thought and the precision of the tribute (Helen Mirren calls Elizabeth "steady, true, and honest") suggest that the words are Queen Elizabeth's own. Addressing the nation "as your Queen and as a grandmother," she refers to Diana as "an exceptional and gifted human being" whom she "admired and respected... for her energy and commitment to others, and

especially for her devotion to her two boys," further stating that "there are lessons to be drawn from her life and from the extraordinary and moving reaction to her death..." The Queen's acknowledgment of her respect for Diana is highly significant. Unable to either obtain the footage or reconstruct it, Frears has expressed regret about not including the unprecedented moment when the Queen actually bowed to the passing coffin, which he found to be "very, very moving...so dignified and graceful."

While many of the critics (and even some of those involved directly with its production) seem to feel that the film is at least partly about the Queen's struggle to adapt to a new media-saturated age that confounds her, Elizabeth II has been uncannily adept at utilizing all forms of media even before her reign, as her youthful radio addresses attest. It was the twenty-seven-year-old Elizabeth who agreed, "after much heart-searching," that the Coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey could be broadcast on television. In 1969 the Queen invited the cameras into her home for the first television film about the royal family, which was made to coincide with the investiture of the Prince of Wales. (In the film, Prince Charles is portrayed sympathetically by Alex Jennings, who is able to evoke all the conflict, despair, and ambivalent confusion experienced by the real Prince Charles upon learning of Diana's death.) And in 1977, the Queen's Silver Jubilee was declared "an unalloyed triumph" in the words of *The Evening Standard*, as millions of her subjects came out to greet her in the streets, "showing a depth of feeling few realized existed." In light of this particular history, then, what *The Queen* does demonstrate, in fact, is the Monarch's carefully considered efforts—in the face of the crass and tragic frenzy that the media had become—to bring her own media savvy into the new era with the respect and dignity that her position deserves.

Another misconception that the film unwittingly deflates centers on Balmoral, the Queen's summer residence in Scotland, that critics repeatedly referred to as a kind of fortress to which the Windsors retreated as a way of avoiding the responsibility of public mourning. In fact, the Scottish castle has everything to do with that complex articulation of deeply personal interests and public royal presence at the heart of the film. As the Queen tells the Blairs during that first meeting—practically inaudible over the audience's laughter at Cherie Blair's (played with gleeful sarcasm by Helen McCrory) legendary "wobbly curtsy"—her great-grandmother Queen Victoria adored the estate, where "all seems to breathe freedom and peace and makes one forget the sad turmoils of the world." In the film this is both ironic and prophetic, ironic because it is quite the opposite of what Queen Victoria imagines, prophetic because it does in fact appear to be the remote idyll the public so deeply resents in the wake of the tragedy. In fact,

The queen ponders the political pressures on her and the royal family in *The Queen*.

Balmoral has great symbolic significance for the Queen. According to royal biographer Sarah Bradford, "Balmoral is the place where Elizabeth can fulfill her childhood dream of being 'married to a farmer and having lots of horses and cows and dogs.' Not without sad relevance to the matter of the film, Balmoral is where a deliriously happy newlywed Diana met the press during her honeymoon with her Prince. Renowned cinematographer Affonso Beato (who has shot over thirty feature films including such classics as Glauber Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes* and Daniel Pollet's *L'Homme des Etoiles*) was able to convey both a sense of the inspiring, heady expansiveness of the Scottish countryside and the intimate pressure of the lush royal interiors, which made the locations of *The Queen* as significant as its characters.

In the film it is this countryside and its traditions that provide Queen Elizabeth with an epiphany and mark a turning point in her reaction to Diana's death. Amazingly, this can also be seen as a point of identification between the Queen and her daughter-in-law, something hinted at in the poster for the film (the Queen standing with a slight half-smile, wearing pearls, in front of a partial image of a half-smiling Diana, also in pearls). Repeatedly in the film Prince Philip insists that all his grandsons need is a bit of hunting to assuage their grief, and indeed there is a magnificent prize: a fourteen-point stag that has eluded capture for years. After the Queen's Land Rover breaks down while she's on a solitary ride, this stag magically appears. Elizabeth exclaims in sad amazement while the pressure of events has exacted its toll, "You beauty!" And then she shoos it away from the inevitable hunters who will appear, assuming that she has saved this noble and dignified beast, bound by centuries of tradition and with whom she identifies. It is only later, as she is finally preparing to meet her grieving public, when she learns the stag has been killed; the trophy belongs to an investment banker, out for sport on a neighboring estate. When she momentarily delays her journey to see the spoils for herself, she notices that the stag had only been wounded; she is told he had to be followed for miles before he was finally killed. "Let's hope he didn't suffer too much," she sighs.

The parallels are obvious; Diana, the most hunted woman in the world, stalked as prey by image-hungry photographers and finally killed, is described as such by her brother immediately after he hears the news of her death and then subsequently in his eulogy, greeted with the unprecedented applause that was the explosion of collective grief. As if to reinforce this subtext of the hunt, the film precedes the car crash that kills the Princess of Wales and Dodi Al Fayed with a brilliantly-orchestrated montage of racing motorcycles, the Mercedes, Paris monuments, and archival footage of paparazzi pursuing Diana through the years. This culminates in the famous footage of Diana's hand covering an intrusive camera lens in Switzerland, where she pleads with the press to leave her children alone, and then a shocking black screen is punctuated by a loudly ringing telephone. This is the pursuit from the stag's point of view, recast in the vocabulary of modern media and the woman's image.

The Queen makes her peace with the stag in the name of centuries of tradition, recognizing that the antlers, symbol of the kill, have adorned royal hallways since the monarchy began. Diana and Queen Elizabeth are shown as linked through a deep devotion to the public and a compassionate understanding of the people as well as the duties of royalty. 'Portraits' of both Elizabeth and Diana bracket the film—Elizabeth's in the image that opens the film and Diana's in the image of her smiling face, winking out from her brimmed hat, that ends the funeral sequence and the week that has led up to it. Diana and Queen Elizabeth are the only two Royals who seem to have expressed, understood, and publicly displayed a sense of the respect and dignity that the monarchy requires.

Another larger framing device involves the meetings between the Queen and Tony Blair. During her meeting with Blair that closes the film Elizabeth observes: "You're afraid that some day, quite suddenly without warning [the loss of public confidence] can happen to you. And it will." Tony Blair's lesson in impending vulnerability teaches him humility, as his ambition is now tempered by a recognition of the hard choices that make popularity ephemeral (witness Blair's disastrous decision to align with George Bush over Iraq). At the film's end, this is what the Queen's sunny walk with Blair in the garden amid the yapping corgis signifies. The distance traced between the film's bookend meetings of the Monarch and her Prime Minister articulates a necessarily modern and self-aware vision of monarchy in the age of democracy, while reminding us of the awesome power of the popular will.—**Sandy Flitterman-Lewis**

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