A Portrait of the Queen: *Elizabeth*

Queen Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett)

Rating: ***½ (1998) Running Time: 124 minutes. Rated R (for sexuality and violence).

Credits

Director: Shekhar Kapur	**Screenplay: Michael Hirst**
Producer: Alison Owen	**Producer: Eric Fellner**
Producer: Tim Bevan	**Cinematography: Remi Adefarasin**
Editor: Jill Bilcock	**Production Design: John Myhre**
Costume Design: Alexandra Byrne	**Music: David Hirschfelder**

Cast

Queen Elizabeth: Cate Blanchett	**Sir Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester: Joseph Fiennes**
Sir Francis Walsingham: Geoffrey Rush	**Sir William Cecil: Richard Attenborough**
Bishop Gardiner: Terence Rigby	**Duke of Norfolk: Christopher Eccleston**
Earl of Sussex: Jamie Foreman	**Arundel: Edward Hardwicke**
John Ballard (Jesuit Priest): Daniel Craig	**the Pope: John Gielgud**
Alvardo de la Quadra (Spanish Emissary): James Frain	**Duc d'Anjou: Vincent Cassel**
Monsieur de Froix: Eric Cantona	**Mary of Guise: Fanny Ardant**
Queen Mary Tudor: Kathy Burke	

By T. Larry Verburg

The Tudor Age (1485-1603) was one of tremendous foment, of dangerous and dark deeds, and woeful uncertainty. The age's Machiavellian politics, its political double-dealing, searing betrayals, lies, falsehood, fear, and greed are convincingly portrayed in *Elizabeth*, as is the deadly rivalry between Protestant and Catholic. As the film begins, we observe in shock the terrible martyrdom of Protestant heretics Master Ridley and two others. In this powerful but dark episode of the film, we witness all of the horror that this execution entails. The savage screams of those burned alive speak eloquently of the almost limitless barbarity that the Tudor Age could produce. Peckenpaw would have approved.

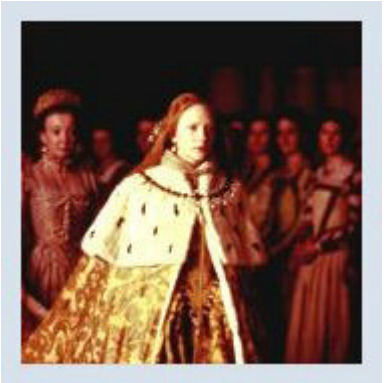
The young Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) is also witness to these events, and because of them, she begins to change, almost visibly, into the woman of iron will she becomes at the end of the film. We are taken, with Elizabeth, to the deathbed of Queen Mary Tudor ("Bloody Mary"), who earned her nickname by having 300 or so heretics (non-Catholics) burned alive toward the end of her reign. We see the sickening insignificance and fragility that is Elizabeth's life in relation to the tumultuous events and historical complexities of the times. Elizabeth's life is weighed in a scale subject to whim, betrayal, and depravity. Her reign, it is made patently clear, is not so secure that she can afford unreflecting leisure and the human warmth and consolation of the love and affection proffered her by Sir Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (Joseph Fiennes).

Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) In A Quite Moment Alone

All of these events and situations are matters of historical record and are convincingly and dramatically handled in the film. Doubly convincing, too, is Daniel Craig as John Ballard, the Jesuit Priest who takes it upon himself, as a sacred mission or Christian jihad, to rid the world of this thing of infamy, this Elizabeth, this Protestant whore who has usurped the throne of England and dared to reclaim England for Protestants.

A visually stunning film, Elizabeth, directed by Shekhar Kapur, has all the look and color and visual texture and sense of a Merchant-Ivory film about Indian during the British Raj. To say that Cate Blanchett plays the part of Elizabeth I of England well is an understatement. In the film we actually see her evolve from relative innocent (if any descendent of the English royal line in the 16th century can be said to be innocent) to Virgin Queen. And this exquisite portrait of Elizabeth, this metamorphosis, is accomplished in a manner as convincing as the caterpillar emerging from her chrysalis in a Nova episode on Public Television.

By the end of the film we are convinced that here, indeed, is a valid recreation of how it must have been. And yet, after having said all of this in praise of the film, it must be also be said that there are several problems with the film, and these must be discussed. The film is of necessity an adumbration of the historical record—and this need not be damaging to the film or upset the history curmudgeons too greatly—if it is done skillfully and for a definite dramatic purpose.



Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) in Her Inaugural Robes

To anyone with a minimal knowledge of Tudor history, it must have seemed odd to have Walsingham sleep with and then murder Mary of Guise early in Elizabeth's reign. Instead of a veritable portrait of Mary of Guise and her death, Mary is little more than an opportunist with a taste for lewd sex, who is sordidly murdered in her bed, an action equivalent to Diane Keyton's murder in *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* (1976). In addition, we have no connection made between Mary of Guise and Mary Queen of Scots (her daughter). Mary Queen of Scots was perhaps more dangerous to Elizabeth and her reign, if only because Mary represented the legitimate Catholic claim to the English thrown. In fact, Mary Queen of Scots was actually held captive for 18 years and eventually beheaded on Elizabeth's authority. Mary of Guise was not only the beloved mother of Mary Queen of Scots, she was the grandmother of James VI of Scotland who became James I of England.

Many incidents and historical actualities are dealt with in a manner that telescopes them into a more dramatic tapestry for the film. Again, this is not necessarily bad, and a filmmaker should certainly have the license to change history here and there to effect a more dramatic—and thus more "real" story for the audience.

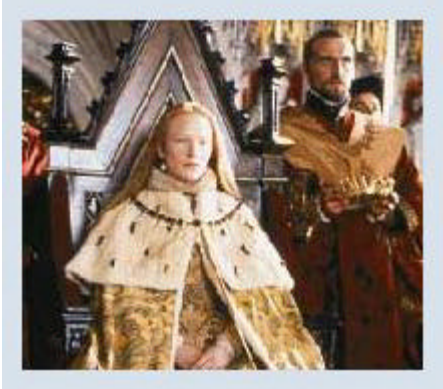
But license does not imply wholesale disregard for the facts. As Kenneth S. Rothwell, writing in *Cineast* ("Film Reviews," 24.2-3 [1999]: 78-80) points out, that in *Elizabeth*, "the eventful period from 1558 to 1573 has been squeezed like an orange to fit the scenario rather than the scenario fitting the events" (78). Rothwell also states that "few of the audience will care about these historical inaccuracies." And in the larger scheme of things, perhaps this is true. But serious changes do affect the credibility of a film. If one important event has been lifted out of place and altered to enhance the color of the drama, might not other historical events also be irrevocably changed from their originals? If one such glaring example of high-handedness be seen by a causal viewing of the film, how many more examples might subsequent viewings betray?

Elizabeth In A Romantic Mood

As Mr. Rothwell observes, "Jesuit priest John Ballard (Daniel Craig) was implicated in the 1586 Babington cabal, not in the Ridolfi plot of some dozen years previously. Elizabeth spoke her famous line, 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king,' in 1588 to her assembled troops, not privately years before to her counselor Sir William Cecil (Richard Attenborough)" (78).

Geoffrey Rush as Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's advisor (really her Head of Secret Service), plays a fine and villainous role as the true believer who watches over Elizabeth's reign with a firm hand and eye and a mind like Machiavelli's. But he is, of necessity, thrown into the shadows by the central role of Joseph Fiennes as Elizabeth's lover, Sir Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. (The film has no time, obviously, to develop that most consummate of Elizabeth's love affairs, that with Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.)

Dudley, then, is the symbol of the physical love that Elizabeth could achieve and maintain, had she not been queen. And Fiennes plays his part well—he is convincing as the lover doomed by his limitations as Elizabeth is by her noble birth.



Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) with the Man Who Would Destroy Her—the Duke of Norfolk (Christopher Eccleston)

Ultimately, however, the film is Elizabeth's and the film delivers a believable and exciting interpretation of that metaphorical skeleton key to the age that brought forth the divine magic of Shakespeare, circumnavigation of the globe, the supremacy of the English navy, and the colonization of the New World.

The lasting image of the film, the one we take away and ponder on, is that of Elizabeth, in effect "marrying" England and passing into the world of myth and symbol. Elizabeth becomes a complex symbol. She is, in effect, a goddess, a queen, and a living symbol of the limitless potential of Renaissance England. She has become, by chance or design—or both—merged in the collective mind with spiritual (the Virgin Mary) and the material (the expansion of Elizabethan England). Elizabeth has become a proper Muse for the artistry, not only of Shakespeare, but of the poet Edmund Spenser (whose great epic, *The Faerie Queene*, was a poetic tribute to Elizabeth), and of the other great literary names of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater—Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson, and John Webster. When Elizabeth sits firmly on England's throne in the film's last scenes, she has at last finely metamorphosed into that magical and mystical creature, Gloriana, the Virgin Queen. Only then do we truly understand both her intense personal pain and suffering and the awesome majesty of her absolute triumph.

Please send any comments or suggestions to:

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