

Victoria and Abdul



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Stephen Frears. Produced by Tim Bevan, Beeban Kidron, Tracey Seaward and Eric Felner. Screenplay by Lee Hall. Based on *Victoria and Abdul* by Shrabani Basu. Cinematography by Danny Cohen. Production Design by Alan MacDonald. Art Direction by Sarah Finlay. Original Music by Thomas Newman. Edited by Melanie Ann Oliver. Costumes by Adam Squires and Consolata Boyle.

Cinematic length: 112 minutes. Production Companies: BBC Films, Perfect World Pictures and Working Title Films. Cinematic release: September 2017 in Venice. Check for ratings. Rating 85%.

All images are taken from the Public Domain, Wikipedia and Wiki Commons following requested permission steps.

Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Judi Dench: Queen Victoria

Ali Fazal: Abdul Karim

Eddie Izzard: Bertie, Prince of Wales

Tim Pigott-Smith: Sir Henry Ponsonby

Adeel Akhtar: Mohammed

Michael Gambon: Lord Salisbury

Olivia Williams: Baroness Churchill

Fenella Woolgar: Miss Phipps

Julian Wadham: Alick Yorke

Sukh Ojla: Mrs Karim

Ruth McCabe: Mrs. Tuck

Simon Callow: Puccini

Jonathan Harden: Kaiser Wilhelm II

Victoria and Abdul has come in for a great deal of criticism, but not from this reviewer. This a well-acted, visually opulent film. These qualities and the original and engrossing story make it enjoyable to watch and then muse over.

Doing that reveals many of the humorous touches, ironies and subtleties that tend to be missed on a first viewing: this is a film which stays in the mind.

Victoria and Abdul tells the story of how two Indians, Abdul Kareem (Ali Fazal) and Mohammed (Adeel Akhtar) go to England to present a ceremonial Mughal coin to Queen Victoria (Judi Dench) as part of India's contribution to the 1887 golden jubilee celebrations of Victoria's reign, but by the queen's wish, they stay on, misplaced and in conflict with the English nobility's world. Their role in Victoria's court was almost unknown as many records concerning them were destroyed after Queen Victoria's death. Although Abdul gained some mentions in histories, his story only emerged after his descendants revealed his diary and a few letters in 2010. Obviously the film must fictionalize a good deal and flesh out what are strong speculations.

After getting the coin Victoria becomes curious about both India and Abdul. As he answers her questions her interest grows and she wishes to learn the languages of India and more about that land. He becomes what he calls a munshi, a teacher/tutor/clerk, a term she uses with intonations of being a savant. As she spends more time with him than the royal household and comes under his influence, many become envious, then alarmed. The fussy and repressive head of the household, Sir Henry Ponsonby (Timothy Pigott-Smith in his last film role) her son Edward, the crown prince, (Eddie Izzard) Baroness Spencer (Olivia Williams) her doctor (Paul Higgins) and her Prime Minister Lord Salisbury (Michael Gambon) conspire to discredit him. This initially works as they reveal to her that he has been telling her untrue stories.

His father was a carpet seller, not the great teacher Abdul claimed. The 1857 Indian mutiny against British rule was not just a Hindu revolt, as being a Moslem he stated. The reality was that many Moslems were heavily involved and their leaders pronounced a fatwah (a religiously inspired death sentence) against the queen. He has not mentioned his marriage. Far from being a teacher, Abdul turns out to be a syphilitic low level clerk working in an Agra jail. He was chosen to go to England as his supervisor was impressed with his abilities in performing another task. His height, handsome looks, decorum and cheerfully servile manners were also factors in the choice. They were also factors in Victoria's giving his recited life story credibility. This is one weakness in the film, for while Abdul seems naively honest, he clearly fails to be truthful in ways that are to his advantage. Ali Fazal's fine performance gives no indication that he is a self-promoting liar or that anything exists in his character but optimism, loyalty and goodness.

Victoria and Abdul in reality and on screen



The narrative and Abdul's admittance to his lies, evasions and omissions show that he has a more complicated personality than the film develops. Reconciling the performance with the story becomes possible if Abdul is as naïve about himself as he is about the world and the people around the queen. There are indications that this is so. When Abdul cheerfully walks into an obviously sullen, suspicious royal household group discussing what they think are his ambitions to control the queen, he cannot or does not read facial expressions and body language. Instead he unknowingly does the worst thing possible. He blithely assumes the poise of a king from the tableaux he just performed, expecting them to be amused. He then ignores their obviously hostile response. When on a train trip to Florence Mohammed tries to give him a friendly warning that they should stay out of trouble by going home to India, he cheerfully responds with a speech about life being a great adventure to be enjoyed and how wonderful this trip is and how wonderful it is to be in the queen's retinue. Their situation is so complex that both men are right; they are in danger, but coming out of an Agra jai into the luxurious, opulent world of British royalty, living without any deprivation in royal castles and having holidays in Florence are indeed pleasures to be savored.

When Victoria finds out his deceits she eventually forgives him and there are only indications why. While initially angry with him she gazes at a picture of her dead husband and her face softens. We do not know exactly what she thinks in this scene. Does Abdul in some unknown way remind her of her husband? Is she thinking what he would have done? This uncertainty is not a problem with the narrative. Asking filmmakers to fully explain the inexplicable is unwise and complying with what investors, critics and the public usually want on that point usually only leads to ineffective and unconvincing film making.

Abdul's appeal to the queen goes beyond being a supply of information about India and teaching her Indian languages. He is the only person in her retinue with consistent supplies of optimism, spontaneity, exuberance and laughter. Miss Phipps (Fenella Woolgar) at times comes close to these characteristics, but except for her, none of the royal circle ever give a genuine smile and few attempt it. Cold, calculating, servile, stifling and stuffy, they are repressed by rules and ritual and the narrow, hierarchal royal structure. Nor is this an occasional situation. It is their way of life and permeates their personalities and perceptions. Abdul unwittingly attacks this when he puts on his tableaux for the court with himself as an oriental king. Baroness Spencer and Miss Phipps are virtually forced to dress in eastern costume, acting as supplicants to Abdul to please the queen. While Miss Phipps smilingly comments that "this is rather fun" the Baroness snarls that she has "never been so humiliated in all her life." While in opposition, both women's responses reveal that they have never been

allowed to pretend for fun. Instead they must always pretend to repress and serve. The tableaux's audience, the clique around Edward are clearly disturbed by Abdul's role. Is this only because as they say, it shows that he wants to be a king? With his tableaux has he unknowingly hit a subconscious sore spot – that they are not the apogee of human civilization, but are little different to the Orientals they despise? They also are pretending to be subservient underlings, not in any depicted oriental court, but in Victoria's.

All societies have rules and rituals, but for most this permeation does not dominate every waking minute as it does here. Most societies and groups have ways of letting off steam. However this does not happen in Victoria's court. It as if some omniscient presence will pounce on them if they say a spontaneous word, laugh, break a nit picking rule, or have a word medal or button out of place. In reality Edward VII would actually reprimand courtiers for such transgressions. Fear of failure and disgrace motivates these people. Considering how horrible life was like for those who lost respectability and positions in Victorian England their fears are well justified.

In a sense *Victoria and Abdul* gives viewers a double performance: the cinematic actors are depicting characters who are acting out their lives in a perpetual round of Victorian era ceremonies. In a few scenes away from those ceremonies the intriguers against Abdul reveal their claws, as when they threaten Mohammed and try to certify the queen as insane. Victoria, Abdul and Mohammed do have several scenes where they reveal their true feelings, but these are not in public or in front of the royal revenue. Mohammed subtly attacks this whole pretense when pompous Ponsonby, chief royal nitpicker and anal retentive fustpot in chief, explains the ridiculous ceremonial procedure for presenting the coin, Mohammed waits until he has gone and then succinctly identifies Ponsonby for what he is. This gets both Abdul's glee and that of the cinematic audience. More satire comes when at the banquet they present the coin, held on a cushion by Abdul. Mohammed can only walk behind Abdul with hands extended carrying an imaginary cushion as they march down the side of a table as long as a football field. The rows of immobile standing servants, liveried in red uniforms, the hundreds of guests in immaculate but uncomfortable clothes, the impossibly ornate settings, are all about this petulant, aged, small woman in widow's weeds, who being more interested in her soup than what and who surrounds her, slurps her soup quickly. She appears as oblivious to the way the soup served to the guests in their hundreds is taken away from them before they have barely started because she has finished. Such scenes have the cinematic audience rightly laughing, but Judi Dench's extraordinarily apt performance also brilliantly captures the poignancy of a woman who although she rules a quarter of the world's surface and population, must battle the hierarchy below her, personified by her courtiers and her son.

Those critics who insist the film is a racist defense of British imperialism in India seem to have ignored all those scenes described. Abdul and Mohammed obviously emerge as the most likeable and decent characters, while almost all the British alienate. When Mohammed is blackmailed and then threatened by the British, he shows courage and loyalty. A more subtle criticism of the British Raj comes with the depiction of Victoria as Empress of India. When questioning Abdul she unwittingly shows herself as extraordinarily ignorant about that land and the people she supposedly rules for their good.

This is only one subtle touch in this very different film and a second viewing will almost certainly reveal others.

