



Film

Brian McClinton

A Very English Affair

The King's Speech

THE *King's Speech* has received such swooning adulation that it seems churlish to strike a note of dissent. It is certainly very entertaining and brilliantly acted by an all-star cast – Michael Gambon, Derek Jacobi, Timothy Spall, Anthony Andrews, Claire Bloom and Guy Pearce join the main trio of Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helena Bonham Carter – and if that's all you want from a film, then you'll be joining the chorus of acclaim. But a film, like any work of art, should do more, and here is where the doubts begin.

A narrative does not exist in a vacuum. The artist(s) who creates it has a certain attitude to his work, whether conscious or unconscious. This is particularly obvious if the artist is dealing with historical events. There is a presumed moral obligation to adhere, at least, to an underlying historical truth. If not, then the artist needs to justify his 'poetic licence' on superior moral grounds. In *Amadeus*, for example, Peter Shaffer paints Mozart partly as a crude, immature superbrat – eine kleine McEnroe – but we accept the image because we realise that it is not always the 'real' Mozart we are seeing but rather the composer as viewed through the jealous eyes of his rival Salieri.

In any case, if you decide to ignore or twist the facts, then you are doing so for a reason. Thus in this film Churchill is presented as supporting 'Bertie' (George VI), whereas in truth he backed Edward VIII, Bertie's elder brother, and violently opposed his abdication. Now, why is this fact distorted? The answer is: you daren't criticise ANYTHING Churchill did because he's a kind of God in the English psyche.

And that's a clue to the conservative nature of the film as a whole. It is more subtle about the king, but ultimately no less respectful. At first, it seems that, through the mouth of cheery Aussie speech therapist Lionel Logue (Rush), who mocks Bertie's stuffiness and obsession with protocol, we are given a kind of satire on British society.



Moreover, George V, Bertie's father, is played by Michael Gambon as an unloving bully. Edward – a superb performance by Guy Pearce – is a pro-Nazi playboy who mocks Bertie's stammer and talks about himself and Mrs Simpson 'making our own drowsies'. The Archbishop of Canterbury is played by Derek Jacobi as a priggish snob, shocked by Logue's lack of 'proper' qualifications. Bertie himself, despite his stammer, is pompous and distant. Overall, these upper class English are hardly the most attractive of people.

Yet the king's apparent coldness is revealed to be, at heart, a shyness, and what we are increasingly drawn into is a profile in courage: the uplifting story of how a shy, sensitive man triumphed over a crippling handicap to become king and a symbol of national unity in opposition to Hitler. When, finally, the king successfully delivers his radio speech at the beginning of the war, we are invited to applaud along with the BBC staff who are producing it.

It was not quite like that at all. The real Logue probably never addressed the king in familiar terms as 'Bertie' – his diaries certainly show a more formal relationship. But by setting up a contrast between his invented impertinence and the king's reserve, the film can have its cake and eat it by being both scornful and reverential at the same time.

Nor was the real king simply the shy, uncomplicated man portrayed

here. According to many historians, he had a ferocious temper and could be quite rude. John Grigg wrote that there were times when George "became so out of control that he actually struck his wife". Nor was his stammer as acute as the film suggests. But by distorting the facts, *The King's Speech* creates a heroic struggle out of a more mundane reality.

Perhaps worst of all, the implied contrast between him and his brother is a fabrication. Far from Edward mocking him for his stammer, they were close friends. And, although he may not have been as pro-Nazi as Edward, he was an appeaser and supporter of Chamberlain. Even in May 1940 when the latter resigned, he still preferred the appeaser Halifax to Churchill as his successor.

These truths, however, would get in the way of a film which aims to flatter the English and make them feel good about themselves, and that is why it has been so popular. For what this clever piece of monarchist propaganda is really saying is: "look we are big enough to laugh at ourselves and our snobbery, class hierarchy and deference, but these characteristics have nevertheless served us well, and in a crisis we are all in it together for the common good".

At present, the English are obsessed with their past and in particular the Second World War. They keep replaying their part in it over and over again, rather than seeking to understand the present and prepare for the future. They are even happy to rewrite their history and place the monarchy at the heart of Britain's 'finest hour' in order to perpetuate the national myth. These are clear signs of a society that is now deeply unsure of itself and its place in the modern world.

As Christopher Hitchens suggests (*The Guardian*, 1st February 2011), *The King's Speech* perpetuates a gross falsification of history. So, enjoy it, yes, but also engage with it critically. Don't be manipulated or seduced into accepting its obsolete values.