

THE QUEEN

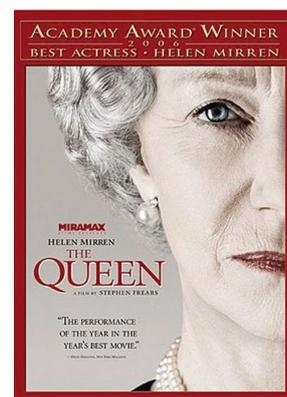
A Miramax 2006 release

A Miramax Films / Pathé / Granada / Canal+ Production

Directed by Stephen Frears

Written for screen by Peter Morgan

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser



Sunday, 31 August 1997. Chances that this date will 'ring a bell' somewhere in peoples' minds are very good. Yes, this is the date of the untimely death of one of the world's most famous idols: Diana, Princess of Wales. For many a rather tragic day that had left behind emotionally charged residue in them. This is very clear by the fact that almost ten years on since her death Diana, and every aspect surrounding her all too short life still manage to fascinate the masses and evoke strong emotional responses. For the House of Windsor her death brought about a significant 're-think' of how they conduct themselves and how they handle others, especially 'commoners' and the British nation as a whole.

The film's focus is on the days preceding the Princess of Wales' death and the time immediately following it. The film's director, Stephen Frears manages to create a 'real life' glimpse into how Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (as played by Helen Mirren), members of her family, her courtiers and 'her' Prime Minister, Tony Blair (as played by Michael Sheen) deals with this 'international tragedy'. The factual content of the actual conversations between the main characters in the film might be in dispute as given by the script writer Peter Morgan, but let there be no doubt as to the power of the startlingly accurate portrayal of the characters of Her Majesty The Queen, His Royal Highness Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh (as played by James Cromwell), Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales (as played by Alex Jennings) and the then newly elected Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The film mixes live footage with the various characters acting the 'behind closed doors' scenes to create a very unique, and at times a rather humorous view of the events that lead to a public 'revolt' against the Monarchy of sorts in the week following Diana's death leading up to her funeral and when Queen finally 'bows' to the wishes of the nation. The divide between the 'reality' of the world out there, and the at-times surreal world within the royal court is very evident in the film. The film also masterfully highlights the various conflictual and power-struggle ridden processes between the royals and the government of the day, on which they as a family are rather dependant on for their livelihood and status.

Of special psychological interest is The Queen's own internal, conflicting processes with regards to Diana's death, the public's 'unexpected' reaction to it, her remarkable sense of restraint and composure in the light of tragedy and how she deals with public and private matters. Here is a character that relies very heavily on

the advice of her courtiers it seems, but one that is also coldly stoical, opinionated and stubborn at times. More than 50 years has she reigned over a country that has seen so many changes, from inside a royal institution that hardly 'moved' an inch in terms of change. Many regard the death of the Princess of Wales to be the catalyst that caused the Monarchy to change its outdated ways and archaic views. Queen Elizabeth is a human being after all, despite her wealth, privilege and lineage, and as such prone to exactly the same psychological processes and life-experiences as are every one else, although some might feel this opinion to be debatable. Hers is a life lived within the public eye, a life open to scrutiny and regular criticism, which might be too difficult to bear.

Diana's death also seems to have had a rather surprising effect on Charles, the Prince of Wales as shown by the film. It is very difficult to imagine that he felt anything for a woman that he never truly loved, although his reaction to the news of her death was that of being devastated. Maybe this is dependant on which 'camp' the viewer finds him- / herself supporting. The film portrays his means of coping with this 'loss' as lashing out towards his mother, Queen Elizabeth, and the mother-son relationship highlighted by the film is one characterised by distance and emotional frigidity. It is well known, as famously reported by Prince Charles himself, that he did not enjoy a warm and loving relationship with either his mother or father. It is when the viewer see all these processes and themes playing out in the film that one remembers that three of the Queen's four children have gone through divorce and one cannot help but wonder how much their 'upbringing' and the parenting styles of both the Queen and Prince Phillip has to do with their lack of stable marriages and close-knit family life. The film begs the following questions: Can life lived in such privilege and isolation under such intense focus and scrutiny turn out anything except abnormal, or rather significantly 'different' to put it more mildly? Also, will we ever see a time when Diana, Princess of Wales will not be the subject of discussion and focus when the royal House of Windsor is in focus?

On a lighter side the film manages to portray Her Majesty's well-known sense of humour and sharp wit, and if it wasn't for the 'tragic' and serious subject matter one might feel that you are viewing a comedy rather than a true-life drama. The film contains exceptionally good acting on very sensitive and difficult subject matter and it is definitely worth watching for a 'different' perspective on the continuing Diana saga.

For noting: *It was brought to the attention of the Editor that Dr Y Farhadi was a co-author of a letter to the editor entitled "Akinetic Mutism", published in the November 2006 edition of the South African Psychiatry Review.*