DVD Select: There will always be an England, thanks to Helen Mirren's royal bearing

by Robert J. Hawkins

God may save the queen, but director Stephen Frears went a long way toward restoring her reputation with his drama "The Queen" (Buena Vista, 4 stars). And he had a great deal of help from the laser-accurate and Oscar-winning portrayal of Queen Elizabeth II by Helen Mirren.

"The Queen" is a smartly speculative account of the week in 1997 in which Princess Diana and her boyfriend Dodi Fayed were killed in an ugly crash in Paris while being pursued by paparazzi.

While Diana became an instant martyr and fixation for people all over the world, the British royal family was ensconced in its summer retreat, Balmoral Castle in the remote serenity of Scotland. The family's silence in the days following her death was troubling for many of the monarchy's subjects.

Frears' movie, with a script by Peter Morgan, takes imaginative flight behind those castle walls to answer the question, "What were they thinking?" And it balances those events with the complementary actions of the recently elected and enormously popular Prime Minister Tony Blair (Michael Sheen).

'THE QUEEN' - Helen Mirren portrays England's beloved Queen Elizabeth II in the movie 'The Queen.' CNS Photo courtesy of Laurie Sparham.

If one thought sums up the movie, it is this: "It ain't easy being queen."

Even though the position has been reduced to a largely ceremonial one, Elizabeth has descended from a long line of monarchists who were trained to follow very exactly written rules of behavior and protocol. She is a deeply private person who, in this version, saw no reason to share the family's grief over the death of Diana with the public. She was also reluctant to expose Diana's two sons, William and Harry, to the glare of the media.

Tony Blair, on the other hand, knew what the public needed and knew how crucial it was that the queen get this one right. That put him in an extraordinarily delicate position as a progressive who could well do without the monarchy and a traditionalist at heart who couldn't imagine England without the royal family.

Watching Mirren as Queen Elizabeth is a delight, especially if you've heard this salty old dame lately on television behaving most un-queenly while discussing her craft.

One of the other delights of this disc is watching the film with British historian and film consultant Robert

Lacey's commentary track running. While he can reach rhapsodic levels (extolling the "almost Shakespearean feeling" of the film), he can be slyly humorous. For example, he mentions the queen's hairstyle, to which "she's stayed loyal to all these years."

Lacey provides an illuminating context for arcane British behavior, explaining castle protocol and the functions of various people hovering around the queen.

When the painfully smug Cherie Blair (at least, as portrayed by Helen McCrory) greets the queen with a clumsy curtsy, Lacey points out that the real prime minister's wife caught heat in the press for her half-hearted bow during their first meeting.

Lacey also points out that the first editions of British newspapers on the day Diana died were filled with venom over her recent scandalous behavior. Those were quickly scrapped, he notes, as later editions rushed to canonize her as "the people's princess" and "Saint Diana."

About the only person to come off badly in the film is Prince Philip (James Cromwell), the queen's husband. He's played largely as a buffoon who is deeply entrenched in the ways of a world that long ago slipped into its twilight years.

The queen, on the other hand, reveres the past but with time begins to see the wisdom in Blair's pleading for her to put on the public face of mourning so that the world can mourn with her.

It is quite a step for her majesty, and quite an achievement that director Frears keeps us holding our breath as we wait for her to take it.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Al Franken: God Spoke" (Docurama, 2 1/2 stars) Can there be anything more pathetic than Bill O'Reilly whining that Al Franken is not playing nice on the radio? You get to see and hear it, as well as a smug Sean Hannity dropping in on Franken's radio program to show him how a real pro abuses his guests. The documentary is about the doomed liberal Air America radio alliance and the attempts of Franken, its celebrity centerpiece, to generate on-air magic. What's sad is that nobody, left or right, has faith in issues and ideas. Franken sinks nearly as low as his conservative brethren. This was not liberal America's finest hour - nor its funniest. But it is instructive.

"Thr3e" (Fox Faith, 2 stars) Based on the novel of the same name by Ted Dekker, "Thr3e" is the first film to ship on the Christian, family-oriented label created by the studio. It's about a madman who is targeting a seminary student with deadly riddle games that need solving before somebody ends up dead.

"Code Name: The Cleaner" (New Line, 1 star) Cedric the Entertainer takes audiences to the cleaners in this action comedy about a janitor who is made to think he is an undercover agent possessing valuable information.

"Night at the Museum" (Fox, 2 stars) Ben Stiller is Larry Daley, an idea guy with no follow-through when it comes to a career. Oddly enough, he's not in California, but New York City, where he takes a job as a night watchman at the Natural History Museum so he can continue seeing his young son Nick (Jake Cherry). He replaces three watchmen played by some of the greats: Dick Van Dyke, Mickey Rooney and Bill Cobbs. Here's the twist: Everything in the museum comes to life at night. Chaos reigns until Larry can get a handle on how to handle the Huns, cowboys, Roman soldiers, roaring lions and a puppy-dog-like T-Rex skeleton. Robin Williams plays a wax-job version of Teddy Roosevelt who has the hots for an Indian guide from the Lewis & Clark exhibit (Mizuo Peck as Sacagawea). Steve Coogan and Owen Wilson as a feuding miniature Roman soldier and a cowboy, respectively, are the film's brightest moments. Ricky Gervais is wasted as the museum director. Stiller falls back on tired and familiar Stiller-isms, which is not the same as acting. Overall, fairly disappointing given the rich potential.

Still more films: Manipulative grifters find love and greed in the thriller "Slingshot"; passion and revenge consume Milla Jovovich in the action-thriller ".45"; happiness has a price tag in the romantic comedy "The Trouble With Men and Women"; and the graphic and brutal "Sombre."

And finally: A Midwest film distributor, Mill Creek Entertainment, breaks into the DVD market with eight films this week, a mix of documentaries like "Into the Air" (about kiteboarding) and dramas like "Fellowship of the Dice" and the loopy "Trona." You can find details online at www.reelindies.com.

IT CAME FROM TV

"Planet Earth: The Complete Series" (BBC) I hope you've been spending your Sunday nights watching this 11-part series on the Discovery Channel. If so, then you know that this is probably the most amazing exploration of the planet yet accomplished by man and his technology. Five years in the making included 71 video contributors in 62 countries: polar bear breeding grounds, wolves hunting caribou with military precision, volcanic vents off the coast of Japan, great white sharks taking their prey. Amazing - and far more than eye candy. The DVD set offers a 10-minute behind-the-scenes feature as well as a 150-minute documentary titled "Planet Earth - The Future" that examines the compelling ecological issues of the day.

"The Lost Tomb of Jesus" (Koch Vision) Film maker James Cameron and director Simcha Jacobovici sure

stirred up some grief with this one when it aired on the Discovery Channel in March. In 1980, a collection of stone coffins were uncovered in Jerusalem that bore inscriptions that included the names of Jesus, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joseph, Matthew and Judah son of Jesus. They've been in a warehouse since the discovery. The disc offers a director's-cut version as well as an additional hour of expert interviews.

"WKRP In Cincinnati" (Fox, Season One) OK, not as controversial as whether Jesus and his wife and child were buried in tombs in Jerusalem, but this ripe old sitcom from 1978 has a controversy of its own. Out in the blogosphere, some writers are royally ripped that most of the classic rock and pop songs that infused life into this series about an also-ran radio station have been stripped out and replaced with generic-sounding music. The generally accepted reason is that greedy record companies and royalties collectors make it prohibitively expensive to publish the original songs. Just so you know, this ain't the original goods.

Also flushed out of the television this week: the first season of "Flipper" (who did not retire to military service as a bomb sniffer); third season of investigative drama "NCIS"; first seasons of the classic "The Odd Couple," "The Drew Carey Show" and "One Day at a Time." Also, five of Peter Falk's feature-length films as the rumpled LAPD detective are released in the set "Columbo Mystery Movie Collection 1989."

FROM THE VAULTS

Fox Home Entertainment is releasing three (technically four or five) classics this week: "Anna Karenina" (1948) starring Vivian Leigh; the 1944 version of "Jane Eyre" with Joan Fontaine and Orson Welles; and a two-disc set of Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables," which includes the 1935 and 1952 versions. The "Anna Karenina" disc includes the 1914 silent film version. All the films are nicely restored to pristine condition.

Also being released: popular comedies "Parenthood" and "Harry and the Hendersons."

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the $1 bin

Â© Copley News Service

DVD Select: There will always be an England, thanks to Helen Mirren's royal bearing by Robert J. Hawkins