

Movie Review: 'Elizabeth: The Golden Age'

by *David_Elliott*

Was the greatest Englishman a woman? Quite possibly, but with due respect to Cate Blanchett, "Elizabeth: The Golden Age" cannot make the case.

'ELIZABETH: THE GOLDEN AGE' - Cate Blanchett dons the Elizabethan collar again, her second regal turn, in 'Elizabeth: The Golden Age.' CNS Photo courtesy of Laurie Sparham / Universal Studios.
RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) This sequel to 1998's more visceral and stylized "Elizabeth," in which Blanchett was a startling, emergent star as Elizabeth I, has Liz in middle age. She sits not very securely on the throne. Much of her population roots for the Catholic cousin Mary Stuart, queen of Scots and aspiring queen of England, kept under house arrest while Spain's Philip II works up his lordly nerve to launch the grand Armada of 1588.

Again balancing the stately with the personal, director Shekhar Kapur packs in Elizabeth's cryptic "affair"

with sea hawk Walter Raleigh (Clive Owen). The queen dangles interest, but since she is iron-willed to remain the Virgin Queen, Raleigh turns his virile attention to the queen's favorite lady-in-waiting, Bess (blond Abbie Cornish, sort of like Grace Kelly upholstered).

Nothing stays secret for long from Liz and her devoted and conniving chief minister, Francis Walsingham (Geoffrey Rush), though history is murky about how far Walsingham concocted Mary's complicity in an attempt to kill Elizabeth. Mary, played with remarkable conviction by Samantha Morton, is a fanatic ready for martyrdom under the ax.

The movie makes much of religion, with a little astrology thrown in as Liz nervously covers her bets. The castles look more like cathedrals. Almost every act is an affair of conscience. The obsessively Catholic Philip II (Jordi Molla) sees things in simple terms: "Elizabeth is darkness. I am light."

Kapur thinks like that, too. As the Armada rolls into English fire ships and a ruinous storm, Philip's chapel candles go out back in Spain. Soon after that, victorious Elizabeth becomes a virtual icon of light, wearing one of her big, winged wigs worthy of Natalie Portman in "Star Wars."

There is some swank pageantry and intrigue in the film, plus Indian warriors brought by Raleigh from the New World. He often seems like the first ambassador from America, tempting the queen with a nation unborn.

Filming secretive kisses by firelight is quaintly regressive moviemaking. And Philip's digital Armada, though huge, doesn't very much improve on what MGM and Warner Bros. did in studio tanks of the '30s.

Philip looks ready to be buried by El Greco, while ruddy Raleigh seems to have stepped from a Van Dyke canvas. But the movie is not art, more like a rich load of stuff. When Owen strikes Errol Flynn poses, and the armored Blanchett seems to be acting Joan of Arc, there's a smell of rust.

Still, Blanchett reigns. Bonily pretty when naked before her mirror, her Liz I has the extra allure of high intelligence (plus some superstition). After playing Kate Hepburn so well in "The Aviator," Blanchett even adds a tinge of Kate to the Tudor hauteur and snap diction of Elizabeth - a part Hepburn never played, though she was "Mary of Scotland" in 1936.

A Universal Pictures release. Director: Shekhar Kapur. Writers: William Nicholson, Michael Hirst. Cast: Cate Blanchett, Clive Owen, Abbie Cornish, Rhys Ifans, Samantha Morton, Geoffrey Rush. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 Stars.

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