

*Elizabeth*, produced by Alison Owen, Eric Fellner and Tim Bevan and directed by Shekhar Kapur. (Gramercy Pictures, 1998, 124 minutes)

"More clearly than the other Tudors," AG. Dickens wrote of Elizabeth and her subjects, "she perceived their hunger for romance without expense," (*The English Riffonation*, London, 1964). In much the same way, director Shekhar Kapur perceives his audience's hunger for historical romance without the rigor of historical complexity. Written by Michael Hurst, the movie *Elizabeth* begins with a brief overview of the last three years of the reign of Mary I and Philip II, and covers primarily the first five years of the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). Kapur and Hearst pull episodes from various periods of Elizabeth's reign and compress them into the first five years. Other facts are wholly altered or expanded upon. In the end, this allows an unfortunately over simple story of Elizabeth developing from youthful naivete to mature authority and regal ability.

The very affecting opening scene, that of the execution of Protestants at the stake in 1555, evokes the horror, chaos and theatricality of the *auto de fe*. Throughout the film, with the exception of several pointless and inexplicable dreamscape sequences, the direction and cinematography capture the opulence and filth, the splendor and horror, the pomp and chaos of sixteenth-century England. The labyrinth dank halls aptly symbolize the Byzantine intrigues of court. The raucous and rude entertainment of court and country are presented as just that, without the implication of quaint refinement that they are sometimes treated with. The coronation pageants, in fact four pageants proceeding the coronation at Westminster in which the full weight of London Protestant support for Elizabeth was displayed and the extent of Elizabeth's public charm was displayed, are conspicuously absent from the film. The film's treatment of the January 15, 1558/59 coronation of Elizabeth at Westminster, however, is magnificent and moving in its display and costuming.

Anomalies abound, however, in the historical narrative. Some are explicable in the realm of artistic license. The papal bull of excommunication that was issued against Elizabeth by Pius V in 1570, is moved back in time to serve as the catalyst for a Catholic court conspiracy against Elizabeth. The plot, in the film uncovered by Sir Francis Walsingham, brings down Lord Arundel, the Duke of Norfolk and royal favorite Robert Dudley. The story shows Elizabeth acting decisively against court conspiracy, maturing in her ability to practice a ruthless *realpolitik*. In reality, this conspiracy (the so-called Ridolfi conspiracy) occurred in the early 1570s, following the papal bull and involved the person of Mary Queen of Scots. The Spanish monarch opposed the conspiracy and the papal bull, and Lord Dudley was not involved. The complexity of Philip II's opposition to the papal bull is ignored in a film where Spanish and Catholic are bad, English and Protestant are good.

Walsingham, played beautifully with agonizing understatement by Geoffrey Rush, was in fact the same age as Elizabeth and did not enter her service until 1571. Sir William Cecil, played by Richard Attenborough, is cast as an aging advisor whom Elizabeth casts off into semi-retirement early in her reign by making him Lord Burghley. Cecil was actually only 38 years of age at the time of Elizabeth's accession and continued as her loyal and trusted servant until shortly before her death in 1603. The presentation of Cecil as no longer needed is an apparent attempt to manifest Elizabeth's new found strength and independence-'off with the old' so to speak. It is rather shocking to see Cecil treated in this manner in an historical drama about the reign of Elizabeth I.

Lord Robert Dudley, played by Joseph Fiennes was the young Elizabeth's favorite early in her reign. William Cecil had to quell rumors inspired by Elizabeth's and Dudley's indiscrete relationship. This film, however, makes their relationship explicitly sexual although this is far from historically certain. What is certain is that Elizabeth, contrary to the film's version, was well aware that Dudley was married. It was suspected that she was awaiting the death of Dudley's wife of breast cancer in order to have Lord Robert for herself. When Dudley's wife, Amy Robsart, died under mysterious circumstances in 1560, Elizabeth had to distance herself from Dudley to avoid the implication of foul play and scandal. While the true story is certainly the stuff of soap opera and could have made for cinematic drama, it would not have placed Elizabeth in the light that the film wished to place her; that of 'offended innocent learning the mendacious ways of the world.' Hennes's Dudley is, as well, a bit too 'Melrose Place' pretty. Elizabeth's biographer J.E. Neale 'knew' the tall, refined, and elegant Dudley. Fiennes is no Dudley. (*Queen Elizabeth I: A Biography*, 1934).

Vincent Cassel is entertaining as the manic, cross-dressing due d'Anjou. Fanny Ardant as his aunt, the regent of Scotland Mary d'Guise seems a bit of a caricature. And the 'artistic fiction' of her murder by Walsingham after having sex is factually outrageous. Cate Blanchett

brings an earthy attractiveness to her role as Elizabeth, although she is likely too attractive. Her use of flirtation and cajoling is well executed and her manifestation of Elizabeth's legendary indecisiveness and compassion is convincing. The character of Elizabeth, however, is ultimately unsatisfying and superficial. And the reason for this hinges of its historical inaccuracy. The actual story of Elizabeth's consolidation of power is certainly drama enough for the big screen. Most of the license taken with facts seems to serve the purpose of showing us an Elizabeth that matured from naivete to worldly-wisdom in the first few years of her reign. But the Elizabeth that survived the reign of her Catholic half-sister Mary well understood the life and death machinations of court, and the Elizabeth that agonized over the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and of Essex, retained the compassionate indecisiveness of youth throughout her life. The complexity of her character was the key to her reign. Her ability to rule with her 'head' and her 'heart,' that complexity and ambiguity of character so difficult to digest in cinematic form, is what we are missing in *Elizabeth* the movie. This simplification is ultimately the reason the film is less satisfying than it could have been.

Kirk Scott