

## Amazing Grace

For anyone who had followed “Masterpiece Theatre” on the tube over the years, it is assumed that the Brits can handle with aplomb their own history on film. Latest evidence of this is the new feature *Amazing Grace* from acclaimed British director, Michael Apted. It tells the moving story of how one man’s passion and perseverance changed his society, and, incidentally, how hard-nosed politics can, sometimes, produce real reform.

Based on the true life story of William Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd), a leader of the British abolition movement, *Amazing Grace* chronicles his lengthy struggle to pass a law to end the slave trade during the late 18th century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The film unabashedly finds Wilberforce’s passion for abolition in a religious awakening in 1784, reinforced by his relationship with his own minister, John Newton (Albert Finney), a reformed slave ship captain who penned the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace.” Others of the movement, like the dogged Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), propel him to see the cause through, as does the spirited young Barbara Spooner (Romola Garai)--who becomes his wife--and his old Cambridge comrade, William Pitt the Younger (Benedict Cumberbatch) who was the long-time Prime Minister from 1783 on.

The drama of the piece springs from, of all things, political wrangling. Wilberforce, a member of the House of Commons, meets inordinately stiff opposition to his views from other members of Parliament in the 1790’s and onward. The parliamentary opposition to abolition by this time is not only racist but stems from a sense that the whole slave trade is necessary to the commercial viability of the British Empire and its maritime power. Most vigorous in expressing this is one Lord Tarleton (Ciaran Hinds), a sour but potent Scotsman and leader of the Tories. The struggle is arduous and long, but, through argument and tactics, the righteous triumph in the first anti-slavery legislation passed in 1807.

Director Apted (*Coal Miner’s Daughter*, *Gorillas in the Mist*, *Enigma*, many others) makes what could be an insipid history lesson into a forceful and effective historical drama. Rich and reasoned language helps (the literate screenplay is by Steven Knight), as does the poignant theme, and a bevy of fine English actors (including the likes of Toby Jones, Stephen Campbell Moore, Bill Paterson, and Michael Gambon) in featured roles. The charismatic Gruffudd, best know for playing Captain Horatio Hornblower on television (1998-2003), brings just the right mix of vulnerability and fervor to this stirring story of the spirit.

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