

Churchill

As one of the singular personages of the 20th Century, Winston Churchill—especially after his death in 1965—has been appropriately featured in popular entertainment. As master politician and statesman, as noted orator and author, as wartime hero and worldly sage—as a generally outsized figure--Winnie was a natural to be depicted in film and television shows on recent British history.

A number of the greats of English acting have recently portrayed Churchill, such as Albert Finney (HBO's "The Gathering Storm"), Brendan Gleeson (HBO's "Into the Storm"), Timothy Spall ("The King's Speech"), and Michael Gambon ("Churchill's Secret"). Even Americans have gotten into the act (he was, after all, half American on his mother's side) with John Lithgow's towering performance in Netflix's "The Crown" last year. Now we have a new entry in the Churchill sweepstakes: Scotsman Brian Cox in "Churchill"

Most Churchillian appearances in TV and film have highlighted crucial periods in his later life, as does the new "Churchill," written by Alex von Tunzelmann and directed by Jonathan Teplitzky ("The Railway Man"). The difference here is that it focuses pointedly on just 96 hours in the run-up to the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944. The drama comes in Churchill's newfound skepticism about Operation Overlord—as the action was code-named—and his contesting it with the Allied commanders, Dwight Eisenhower (John Slattery) and Field Marshall Montgomery (Julian Wadham). The military men, having planned the immense operation for months, want to launch as soon as the weather allows, while Churchill, harboring vivid memories of World War I misadventures, is reluctant to commit tens of thousands of "our boys" to another potential slaughter (visions of Gallipoli in 1915 seize his mind).

The four-day squabble between these men forms the heady drama, the arguments mitigated somewhat by the reasoned advice of Field Marshall Jan Smuts (Richard Durden) as Winston's adjutant, and the levelheaded calm of Clementine Churchill (Miranda Richardson) who knows the great man's moods better than anyone. The tension is heightened by Churchill's errant behavior, compounded of too much Scotch, a seriously depressive personality, and the flooding war memories. How much of what the prime minister actually went through in those four days is not exactly known, but it makes for a tense, tick-tock movie.

So how does Cox do as Churchill? Aptly, the actor (born 1946) is almost the exact age Churchill was at the time. His has the right girth (though shorter). His face is harsher than Churchill's round, Teddy-bear appearance, and his voice carries the right tone of sadness and menace, though without Winston's dramatic, rolling baritone. To give the man some gravitas and stature, Teplitzky often shoots Cox from below, with bowler, cigar, and scowl, nicely suggesting Churchill if not mirroring him. In sum, Cox carries off the impersonation well, offering a good range of the man's moods and mannerism.

Richardson is very fine as wife "Clemmie." You get the patience and tough love she exhibited to regulate her fury of a husband, especially at this watershed moment. Her chastening of him, balanced with her careful encouragement, is delicately

portrayed; she realizes that he needed her to counterpoise his almost demonic personality.

Much less successful is the sadly miscast John Slattery as Ike. Slattery, well-remembered from "Mad Men" on television, essentially repeats his demeanor on that show: fast-talking, sarcastic, and brusque, totally at odds with the real Eisenhower, who was deliberate, even halting in speech, but with a warm timbre. Moreover, there is almost no resemblance, except perhaps for his army cap.

It's no matter, the picture is Cox's to succeed or fail. He mainly succeeds. (*"Churchill" is rated PG and runs 98 mins.*)

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