

The Madness of King George

In 1788, King George III of England, already a monarch for 28 years, fell victim to a strange disease, producing a bizarre behavior which almost cost him his throne. He came out of the malady to rule again, only to go utterly insane some 20 years later. This historical footnote triggered British playwright Alan Bennett to write one of his most resounding theatrical successes, "The Madness of George III." With many of the key principals and with a slight name change (thus avoiding the appearance of a film sequel), this fine drama has been converted into a splendid screen entertainment.

Besides Bennett's sterling screenplay redefining the film, *The Madness of King George* boasts first-time film director Nicholas Hytner (who directed the stage play), and Nigel Hawthorne, who reprises the title role he created on stage. They, along with a superb English cast and crew, mix and mingle history, humor, and tragedy in a worthy blend--like spring water and smooth Scotch.

The film opens with the pomp of the Parliament's opening, and the earthy George (Hawthorne) is in full command, running his kingdom (if still miffed about losing "the colonies") but having somewhat less luck with his household (including his 15 children), especially the Prince of Wales (Rupert Everett), itching for a greater role in the reign. But he begins to act strangely, blathering non-stop, spouting obscenities in public, making randy with the Queen's Lady in Waiting (Amanda Donohoe); he suffers agonizing pain and his urine runs blue. Royal doctors come up with varied--and totally conflicting--diagnoses, one for example, finding the royal "stool more eloquent than the pulse." Meanwhile, his allies in parliament, led by Prime Minister William Pitt (Julian Wadham) try to defend him against the Whig opposition and Mr. Charles Fox (Jim Carter), who is allied with the Prince. The latter wants his father declared unfit so he can become regent, and he even denies his mother, Queen Charlotte (Helen Mirren), access to the sovereign. Finally alone with his madness, the King's only ally remains his loyal attendant, Captain Greville (Rupert Graves).

Lady Pembroke finally gets Pitt to recommend a new physician, Dr. Willis (Ian Holm), who heads a provincial insane asylum, and the doctor embarks on a 18th Century tough love regime that includes blindfolding, gagging, and strapping the king bodily into a chair when he goes on a rant. His progress is fitful, but he does progress and becomes more self-aware. Ultimately reunited with his Queen through the intercession of Lady Pembroke and Greville, he assumes his kingly bearing anew, frustrates his opposition, and returns in triumph to Windsor. In Bennett's phrase, he "remembers how to seem."

Historians' best guess is that George III suffered from "porphyria," an inherited metabolic defect which produces an excess of purple-red pigments in the blood, causing pain, hyperactivity, and delirium. It also appears that no treatment, not even Willis's, really cured the King; he simply grew out of his attacks. Whatever it was the real George suffered, his madness is made flesh again in the spellbinding performance of Nigel Hawthorne.

Hawthorne, mainly a stage actor, has only been in occasional movies (most recently *Demolition Man*). He is probably best known to Americans for his long-

running role in the BBC/PBS series "Yes Minister" as the smooth Sir Humphrey. In *The Madness* he finds the role of a lifetime. He incarnates "Farmer George," a down-to-earth monarch who likes to get down in the manure with pigs and who coyly calls his wife "Mrs. King." Both extremely funny and unnerving as the king of the lewd and raunchy, he both drops one-liners and drops jaws with his shenanigans.

Yet he can be so poignant as to bring tears to one's eyes as that most unfortunate being: the mad man aware of his madness. While Hawthorne rants convincingly as the Mad Monarch, that is relatively easy compared to the scene where, confronted for the nth time with the torture chair for misbehavior, he resignedly, leadenly, succumbs to his treatment and moves to the chair himself to accept his bonds. It is a heart-breaking moment. Another moving scene finds the King, by now adjusting to his fate, reading parallels to his life from "King Lear" with his Lord Chancellor (John Wood) and Greville. It is a moment brilliantly created by Bennett and gloriously played by Hawthorne--one deposed king wistfully recounting the lines of a second.

The cast sparkles with impeccable British talent. The splendid Helen Mirren (*Prime Suspect*'s Inspector Jane Tennison) as the Queen doesn't get to show much range, but she is both noble and touching--with a convincing German accent. Ian Holm is forceful and scrappy, much in the spirit of his character of the coach in *Chariots of Fire*. Young Rupert Graves (Freddy in *A Room With a View*) does a fine portrait of a slightly addled, totally loyal soldier, while Amanda Donohoe (*L.A. Law*) is fetching and smart as a clever plotter for the King. Rupert Everett, known for moody roles, plays against type as a fat, bored fop of a Prince of Wales, and stork-like John Wood, as the Lord Chancellor, is perfectly fustian and dizzy. Messrs. Wadham and Carter, too, characterize beautifully the prissy conservative Pitt and the testy Whig Fox.

Alan Bennett's script is the core of the film, and it shines with wit and intelligence. He can beautifully capture his protagonists, as when the Prince defends himself with: "It takes character to endure the rigors of indolence." And he can raise genuine psycho-historical issues, as when the restored King unhesitatingly consigns those who have helped him, like Dr. Willis, back to their subordinate station. No sentimental gratitude for this ruler.

Nicholas Hytner makes a fine film debut. Known for his Shakespearean work and big-time musical productions ("Miss Saigon," "Carousel"), he demonstrates a gift with actors and an ability to move the story along briskly. While taken from a highly verbal work, his is no stiff adaptation. Hytner is seconded well by his crew, especially his veteran production designer, Academy Award winner (for *Barry Lyndon*) Ken Adams, and his superb costume designer, Mark Thompson, who designed both sets and costumes for the original stage production. I must note particularly the musical score contributed by George Fenton. Rife with plangent airs by Handel, it matches perfectly the royal, courtly spirit of this grand, yet moving picture.
(The film is rated "R" for sexual innuendo and royal swearing.)

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