

Victoria & Abdul

For those Anglophiles who want another immersion in the warm, luxurious stew of the British monarchy, look no further for your latest fix than “Victoria and Abdul,” an engaging if utterly predictable dip into late Victorianism by a whole passel of old British pros, plus an attractive newcomer.

All you need to know is that Dame Judi Dench rules this film as Queen Victoria, way late in her reign, alienated from her son (the future Edward VII), sour as vinegar from her unending rule, and looking for some—any—breath of the novel and the fresh. As she herself admits when challenged in the film: “I am cantankerous, greedy, fat; I am perhaps, disagreeably, attached to power.” Her relief comes in the form of one Abdul Karim, a young, literate Indian Muslim (Ali Fazal) who is selected to come to London from Agra in 1887 to deliver a special commemorative coin to Her Majesty on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee.

Abdul is supposed to be invisible to the Queen, but instead he catches her eye, then her mood, and finally, her spirit to the point where he becomes her teacher, or “munshi,” in all things Muslim and Indian as well as serving as her clerk. Theirs is a relationship which appalls her family—including the Prince of Wales (a bombastic Eddie Izzard)—and the court—especially in the person of Sir Henry Ponsonby (the uptight Tim Pigott-Smith) but which lasted until the Queen’s death in 1901.

Sound familiar? Of course, we are in the same realm as the earlier “Mrs. Brown” (1997) where Judi Dench as Victoria is taken with another fellow beneath her station, an Irish manservant, John Brown, who, in the 1860s, became a surprise confidante of the sheltered monarch because he was not deferential and challenged the strictures of her rule. Consider the two films bookends of late Victorianism, Dench-version.

(As an aside and to close the circle of queens, consider Dench’s Oscar-winning turn as Queen Elizabeth in “Shakespeare in Love” (1998) followed by that other English thorough-bred actress Helen Mirren, who also played Elizabeth I in the 2005 HBO series “Queen Elizabeth.” Mirren then matched it by playing Elizabeth II in “The Queen” (2006) a prize-winning film directed by none other than Stephen Fears, who made “Victoria & Abdul,” thus closing the circle.)

“Victoria & Abdul,” written by playwright Lee Hall (“Billy Elliott”) and based on a book by Shrabani Basu, is a pleasing confection, principally due to the gentle cross-cultural humor that the intensely loyal Abdul introduces into the stuffy palace environment (most of the Queen’s entourage are sour racists) and to the consummate performance of Dench as the Queen, dominating every scene.

Dench is a perfect fit for the aging monarch, even though the actress is 82 years old and playing the 68-year-old Victoria (in 1887). She portrays a woman plagued by old age, loneliness, and a whole series of physical ailments, and her face and body reflect that demise. We see her first falling asleep at another routine royal dinner before Abdul arrives with his coin to perk her up.

As the warmth of their relationship grows, Fears and Dench are able to show a woman brighten and come alive at both a handsome youth’s attentions and with a

renewed drive to learn something new and investigate an unfamiliar world. Dench is able to embody the last late flame of life before its end.

Judi Dench has had an amazing career in her golden years, appearing in more than 30 films since 1995, and this is probably the last time we will see her as a queen, and for that she merits a grand curtsy.

(The film is rated "PG-13" and runs 112 mins.)

(September 2017)