

Phantom of the Open

How often do you see a comedy movie about golf? In the last decades, there has been a few American movies like the over-the-top, madcap “Caddyshack (1980)” featuring goof-balls like Bill Murray and Rodney Dangerfield, and “Tin Cup (1995)” a semi-serious satire about the PGA tour with Kevin Costner. In 1996 there was another ribald farce, “Happy Gilmore,” an Adam Sandler vehicle about a lousy hockey player who stumbles unto the professional golf tour.

Now we have a sweet British golf comedy with a decidedly more whimsical tone and, moreover, a saga that really happened. It is a heart-warming story of an everyman taking on the most prestigious tournament in the sport, the British Open, with a lovely performance by its lead, Mark Rylance.

“Phantom of the Open,” directed by Craig Roberts, relates the story of one Maurice Flitcroft (Rylance), a forty-ish crane operator in a North English shipyard who lives a routine life in a gritty city with his supportive wife Jean (Sally Hawkins) and three boys. The elder is Michael (Jake Davies), ashamed of his family’s origins and looking to turn his life around as a respectable businessman. The other two boys, twins James and Gene (Jonah and Christian Lees), are lovers of disco music with dreams of becoming a popular dance duo. He once promised his wife that their marriage would be “champagne, caviar, and diamonds,” but that didn’t quite work out.

While watching the 1975 British Open on the telly (and worrying about his job), Maurice has a epiphany about he himself playing golf and triumphing in the “Open” (as it is always called in England). This vision leads him to announce that he will enter the tournament, to the shock and chagrin of family and friends. After all, the man has never played a round of golf in his life! A total naïf, he appears before the Open’s authorities only to be totally rejected as having no credentials. Still, by some administrative fluke, he somehow is enrolled and duly tees off at the Open. He then proceeds to play the worst round in tournament history—121.

Flitcroft thus becomes infamous as the “worst golfer in history” but also gains national notoriety as a lovable British loser and a representative of two figures often beloved by the British public: the charming underdog as well as the dogged dreamer. By the way, he stuck to his dream: he tried to enter the Open multiple times, including one episode—shown in the film—where he used a disguise as a cheesy French golfer.

This sprightly comedy works because of Rylance, who personifies both the simple guile and the earnest effort the character demands. Rylance, one of the world’s most accomplished Shakespearean actors (and the first director of the New Globe Theatre) was born in 1960 and educated in the US. He began his

acting career in the late 1980's, always balancing theater and film work. He has come to be best known to American audiences through his leading role as Thomas Cromwell in two lauded BBC series based on "Wolf Hall" (2015), the same year he won an Oscar for his role as a spy in the Steven Spielberg drama "Bridge of Spies."

Since those breakthroughs, Rylance has piled up laurels in other major pictures such as a benevolent giant in BFG (2016), a local seaman in "Dunkirk" (2017), a magistrate in "Waiting for the Barbarians," (2019), defense attorney William Kunstler in "The Trial of the Chicago 7" (2020), a bonkers scientist in "Don't Look Up" (2021), and a mysterious tailor in the recently released "The Outfit." "Phantom of the Open" just confirms the range and excellence of his work.

(Rated "PG-13," the movie runs 106 minutes.)

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