

The Duke

Two British screen legends lead the cast in this delicate romp, the last filmmaking effort of veteran English director Roger Michell.

For any movie fans of classic Ealing comedies of the 1960's, the new British pleasantry "The Duke" should be right down their alley. It features a lower-middle class gadfly and motormouth Kempton Bunton (Jim Broadbent), who aims to help older, impoverished citizens who are unable to pay the annual license fee for the BBC radio-television service. He continually writes scripts for the BBC which are totally ignored, while his wife Dorothy (Helen Mirren), a practical housecleaner, grows tired of his lost causes and thinks his campaign is daft. The two have become distant from each other after their teen-aged daughter died in a bicycle accident years before. Dorothy cannot even bring herself to visit the girl's grave.

"The Duke" is set in 1961, when Kempton, a 60-year-old taxi driver in Newcastle, travels to London to campaign in Parliament for his "free TV" cause. While he is there, Francisco de Goya's famous portrait of the Duke of Wellington is stolen from London's National Gallery, the first theft from that museum. The picture ultimately lands in Bunton's hands, and he brings it back to Newcastle.

Bunton, with the help of his son Jackie (Fionn Whitehead), hides the painting in his home, unbeknownst to his wife. He then sends ransom notes both to the authorities and the press saying that he will return the painting only on the condition that the government agree to provide the BBC service gratis for older pensioners. Meanwhile Bunton loses his taxi job, though he finds another at a bakery.

The notoriety of the theft leads authorities to search Bunton's home for the portrait. The painting is not found, but he is charged with theft anyway and placed in prison awaiting trial. Hoping for a sympathetic jury and defended by a skeptical but smooth attorney Jeremy Hutchinson (Matthew Goode), he anxiously awaits his fate in the dock.

"The Duke" is sound whimsy, aided greatly by the contrasting, and graciously supportive, performances by the leads. Broadbent is a bit of a doofus, but he's a genuinely funny one and ingratiating to boot (if you can stand his incessant talk). While at trial, he delivers lively and hilarious testimony—much of it taken from the original trial records.

Mirren (now 77 years old) looks as old as she ever has in movies and is made up and dressed to look even older. She flicks out her dialogue like an old sitcom wife steadily disparaging her bumbling husband. (Surprisingly, too, she has come

to resemble, more than ever, Queen Elizabeth II, whom she has played on several occasions.)

“The Duke” was a fine send-off for Roger Michell (who died suddenly last September). He was probably best known for his hugely successful comedy “Notting Hill,” but may have reached his apex as a director with the 1995 TV movie “Persuasion,” an exquisite adaptation of the Jane Austen novel. He works from a clever script—based on a true story—written by Richard Bean and Clive Coleman.

(Now in theaters, the film runs 95 minutes and is rated “R.”)

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