Victoria and Abdul Review

* To the utter dismay of her staff, Queen Victoria strikes up an unexpected friendship with a young Indian clerk, Abdul Karim.
* Directed by Stephen Frears: *The Queen*, *High Fidelity*, *Florence Foster Jenkins*.
* Written by Lee Hall: *Billy Elliot*, *War Horse*.
* Starring Judi Dench, Ali Fazal, Tim Pigott-Smith.
* Adapted from a book.
* Based “sort of” on a true story.

I’m not saying that this was necessary an appealing premise. I’m not saying this movie is for everyone. What I am saying is, neither is watching someone in a speedo swim laps as fast as he can. Or someone in spandex shorts ride a bicycle for 21 days through France. And yet, if we’re lucky, once in a lifetime a person comes along who can, for one shiny moment, change everything we think we know. Someone who’s so god damn undeniably great that you can’t help but watch with pure childlike wonder. Ladies and gentlemen and everyone outside and in-between: Phelps. Jordan. \*Armstrong. Bolt. Dench.

The woman wears a period piece wardrobe like superman wears a cape. Begrudgingly, I’ll stop my ass kissing there, and only add that, though, on principle I refuse to use the term “tour de force” ever, she put on a hell of a clinic.

This film boasts at the onset that it’s “Based on real events… mostly.” I can’t speak to that, and I’m saving myself the trouble by just treating it as a work of historical fiction. Try and stop me.

Now that I’ve gotten that out of the way, yes, my main argument for this movie is simply “cause, Judy Dench.” But there’s plenty more going on here. Ali Fazal, as Abdul to Dench’s Victoria has a star making performance, and the long list of costars, especially Adeel Akhtar, as the comic relief (Akhtar was my favorite part of this years break out romcom *The Big Sick*, as well) really give this its dimension.

The colors and cinematography make this film feel like looking at a warm, textured painting. Abduls unflinching optimism despite his having every reason to be resentful and bitter brings out a playful curiosity inside of the otherwise curmudgeonly queen Victoria that’s a joy to watch; even more so when played against her ambitious, unapproving household staff and inner circle. It’s a simple story about finding friendship and love where you least expect it, and about the courage it takes to hold onto that fragile beauty.

PERSCRIPTION:

To see Dench’s first go at playing Queen Victoria: Watch Mrs. Brown.

To see another Dench lead movie about finding beauty in the culture of India: Watch The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.