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Film Discussion Group
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Victoria & Abdul (dir. Stephen Frears, 2017)

On Camera

Queen Victoria:	Judi Dench: famously played Queen Victoria in <i>Mrs. Brown</i> (97)
Abdul Karim:	Ali Fazal: Bollywood hit <i>Fukrey</i> (13); few credits outside of India
Bertie, Prince of Wales:	Eddie Izzard: primarily known as a brash, subversive comedian
Sir Henry Ponsonby:	Tim Pigott-Smith: <i>The Jewel in the Crown</i> (84); died this year
Dr. James Reid:	Paul Higgins: Scottish stage and film actor; <i>In the Loop</i> (09)
Mohammed, fellow servant:	Adeel Akhtar: Kumail Nanjiani's brother in <i>The Big Sick</i> (17)
Prime Minister:	Michael Gambon: the Chief of Staff in <i>Viceroy's House</i> (17)
Giacomo Puccini:	Simon Callow: Boundary-drawer in <i>Viceroy's House</i> (17)

Off Camera

Director:	Stephen Frears: Most recently worked with Dench in <i>Philomena</i> (13)
Screenwriter:	Lee Hall: <i>Billy Elliot</i> (00), based on the 2010 book by Shrabani Basu
Cinematography:	Danny Cohen: <i>The King's Speech</i> (10, Oscar nomination), <i>Room</i> (15)
Original Score:	Thomas Newman: 14 Oscar nominations, from <i>Wall-E</i> (08) to <i>Skyfall</i> (12)
Art Direction:	Alan MacDonald: Most of Stephen Frears's films since <i>The Queen</i> (06)
Costume Design:	Consolata Boyle: noms for <i>The Queen</i> (06), <i>Florence Foster Jenkins</i> (16)
Film Editing:	Melanie Oliver: <i>Jane Eyre</i> (11), <i>Pride</i> (14), <i>Bridget Jones's Baby</i> (16)

Also directed by Stephen Frears ...

My Beautiful Laundrette (1985) – Boundary-breaking, Oscar-nominated comedy-drama about the young, male Pakistani heir of a family laundrette who starts an affair with Daniel Day-Lewis

Sammy and Rosie Get Laid (1987) – Another portrait of a non-decorous, multi-racial London

Dangerous Liaisons (1988) – Graduation into “prestige” dramas, casting Malkovich against type

The Grifters (1990) – Tough, contemporary noir with Anjelica Huston; first Oscar nomination

High Fidelity (2000) – Semi-romantic semi-comedy set in and around Chicago music stores

Dirty Pretty Things (2002) – Below-the-radar hit about immigrants working in a London hotel

Mrs. Henderson Presents (2005) – Dench stars as WW2-era manager of a burlesque cabaret

The Queen (2006) – A poet of ragged-edged, punk-era London makes a film about the royals!

Florence Foster Jenkins (2016) – His latest period comedy-drama with a major US/UK actress

Other films with direct ties to *Victoria & Abdul* ...

Mrs. Brown (1997) – Judi Dench was nearly 65 when she played her first lead film role, starring as Queen Victoria after her beloved husband's death, becoming intimate friends with John Brown

Queen Victoria's Men (2008) – A documentary/drama hybrid made for UK television, chronicling Victoria's key relationships with men, including Prince Albert, John Brown, and Abdul Karim; not clear to me if it ever actually aired; here is a trailer: <https://vimeo.com/13175592>

Queen Victoria's Last Love (2012) – Another TV documentary/reenactment hybrid by the same director, this one dedicated more exclusively to Victoria's relationship with Abdul

Facts about *Victoria & Abdul* you may appreciate...

Around the same time that Gurinder Chadha began developing *Viceroy's House*, based on new information about how Lord Mountbatten was manipulated into partitioning India, historian Shrabani Basu published *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant*, which constituted most people's first exposure to this story, dwelling at length on the copious letters they exchanged. (Judi Dench says in an interview that Victoria sometimes wrote to Abdul five times a day.) Basu herself discovered the tale while doing research about curry!

Ali Fazal heard about the Bombay auditions for *Victoria & Abdul* a week after they had ended—but also gathered that the lead role may not have been cast. He recorded footage on his iPhone that made its way to Frears, who was determined not to cast an actor raised in the UK. In sync with his character, Fazal's first-ever trip to London was for the filming of this movie.

Fazal lied during pre-production about having read Basu's history book about Victoria and Abdul. Instead, he read several broader accounts of the Victorian period. He also read the chapter about Abdul in the memoir by Dr. James Reid, the outraged physician who appears in the film.

The opening title (“Based on real events...mostly”) signals the film's flexible relation to historical truth, and Frears has signaled that whenever they could lighten the mood of the story, they did. Fazal says that some episodes, like leaving to retrieve his wife and mother-in-law and bringing them back at the Queen's command, happened just that way. More controversial has been the film's view of Victoria as an “anti-racialist” whose enlightened views were unpopular at court.

Most of the money for *Victoria & Abdul* came from Working Title Films, the hardy British mini-major studio whose first production was Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1985. After the global hit *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), the company's brand has been linked to export-friendly British comedies like *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Love, Actually*—though the company's portfolio, just like Frears's own, ranges into a huge range of genres.

Victoria & Abdul has drawn lots of warm reviews but also lots of critique, particularly in the UK and India, for its sunny view of the relationship between the lead characters and its refusal to acknowledge the brutal imperial history that culminates in the events of *Viceroy's House* (though that film, too, has drawn divided reviews). The critic for the English-language, India-based *Hindustan Times* compared Abdul in this film to Samuel L. Jackson's character in *Django Unchained*, a black overseer of slaves: <http://tinyurl.com/ya26zggb>

Broad conversation topics...

Victoria: Scholars, historians, and others have insisted many times that Queen Victoria was not the dour, sexually repressed dowager as whom she is often stereotyped today, although debate still rages about the relative enlightenment of her views (in her own time, or compared to ours), about the precise nature of her relations with John Brown and Abdul Karim, etc. What struck you most about the movie's portrait of Victoria? Did it have to do with the film's treatment of her age? Her gender? Her predicament as a powerful leader so often challenged from within?

Abdul: Criticisms of the movie have largely gravitated to what many reviewers have seen as a flat quality in how Abdul is written and played: so much wide-eyed wonder in the first hour, so little dialogue in the second, ending with him literally kissing the feet of Victoria's statue in Agra. Do you agree with these critiques, or did you respond more favorably to the role? How did the actor's performance affect the way you thought or felt about the character as written?

Love, Actually: Judi Dench has said she does not believe Queen Victoria was in love with Abdul Karim per se, and that the nature of their bond was "much bigger" than love, extending to a kind of deep, mutual communion between people who did not expect to recognize each other. She has also said she perceived Abdul as someone around whom Victoria could freely speak her mind and genuinely relax, since even her closest court advisors were not trustworthy. At the same time, *Victoria & Abdul*'s script dwells repeatedly on how handsome she finds Abdul, and her reaction to discovering that he is already married is quite intense, even heartbroken. Based on the film, how would you describe the nature of her attraction to him, or his to her?

Naming the Conflict: Indeed, the film raises several reasons why Victoria's circle is objecting to her newfound friendship with Abdul: he is a foreigner, and specifically "brown"; he is not a Christian; he is already married; nobody knows anything about him; he may be an imposter, with a very different background than he claims; she is giving him reckless access to sensitive documents; the Prince and the court feel marginalized. Which, to you, was most at issue?

Historical Background, Geographic Reach: In *Viceroy's House*, a great deal of crucial narrative content has transpired in Lahore, before the movie begins, including Jeet's first meeting with Aalia and her family, and the Mountbattens' successful career in Burma. *Victoria & Abdul* skips most of Abdul's life before he embarks on his voyage to India, and fills in much less of it later than it offers about Victoria's past (which most viewers will know more about anyway). Would you have liked to know more about Abdul's life before Victoria enters into it? Notice that the film does not follow him to India when he goes to retrieve his wife—similarly to how *Viceroy's House* declined to follow Lord Mountbatten on his trip to the UK. Do you think the film would have benefited from spending more time in India, or with the Indian characters?

Contemporary Contexts: As *Victoria & Abdul* opens, journalists in the UK and elsewhere are speculating often on what it will mean when Queen Elizabeth II inevitably dies, and meditating as well on the relevance (or not) of the monarchy in today's world. Obviously, much of the UK has recently been gripped by a xenophobic-nationalist trend that culminated in the Brexit vote, and it now has another female leader in Theresa May, many of whose citizens and fellow party members question her judgment. Does any of that color how you consider this movie?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Introductions: What do you make of the fact that when we first see Abdul, he is praying, whereas when we first behold Victoria, she is snoring? In fact, Dench gets a long, grand entrance, being dressed by her maids in a long series of shots that hide her face, even though we already know what she looks like. In a way, the audience is being “instructed,” just as Abdul is, not to look at Victoria directly. I also took this long sequence as a kind of tribute to the famous start of Frears’s own *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), where Glenn Close’s and John Malkovich’s ornate costumes and makeup are meticulously applied by their respective teams of servants.

Mohammed: The other, shorter Indian man who is shipped off with Abdul to participate in the *mohar* ceremony is often the voicebox for the script’s darker ideas about imperialism and power: “We are traveling 5,000 miles to present a bloody medal to the oppressor of the entire subcontinent!” he objects on the boat. Did you take Mohammed’s concerns about Victoria and eventually about Abdul seriously, or did he feel more like comic relief? What did you make of the film’s last-act decision to have him die at the exact moment that Victoria collapses in the hallway—but not to cut away to Mohammed? We attend his funeral but never see him dead.

Cultural Appropriation: As the head of the ceremonial dinner recites the menu, almost every dish is French; clearly, the highest levels of English culture borrow what they like from other cultures. (If you’re interested, ask me about a great book about French and English cooking.)

Sound and Music: The entire filmmaking team, including the sound mixers and composers, are clearly preparing us throughout this early dinner for *Victoria & Abdul*’s semicomical tone—just listen to how the waiters carrying the soup into the dining room sound like military marchers. Rather than make Victoria the emblem of all this fussy, over-scaled frippery, the composer makes her the exception: we finally cut to a frontal view of her face, and all the bombastic or satiric melodies from earlier drop out in favor of tender strings and even, briefly, a harp.

Gluttony: Three of Victoria’s earliest scenes, in England and outdoors in Scotland, find her eating—and often filmed like Henry VIII, tearing into drumsticks, gobbling away, licking her fingers. The motif is so pronounced, and so lingered upon by the close-up camera, that you’d be forgiven for seeing the seeds of critique here: Victoria is being presented as an obese glutton, consuming everything she likes, including Indian history and culture, via Abdul. But that line of implied satire turns out to be a blind alley, not picked up as the plot evolves.

You’re a Drag, Prime Minister: Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister played by Michael Gambon, is another character whom the screenplay repeatedly enlists to remind us of grimmer aspects of world history and of British colonialism. He informs Queen Victoria early on of “another famine in India” and of unfolding violence and misadventure in Ireland, South Africa, and the Suez as well. Victoria reacts as though he is a dour killjoy, and the film seems to agree.

Framing: Even as they grow fonder and closer, taking walks along tree-lined paths, Victoria and Abdul are mostly filmed in separate close-ups until he begins teaching her Urdu. At that point, the movie finally begins grouping them in two-shots. Given the centrality of language to the film, were you surprised the Indian characters were not allowed to speak much Hindi or Urdu?

Cultural Specificity: Because our first shot of Abdul found him prostrate during a Muslim prayer call, we know that the English characters, including Victoria, are mistaken in consistently referring to him as Hindu. That said, Abdul appears to know aspects of multiple languages and cultures within India, blending them together in a way that, after *Viceroy's House*, may have struck you as more noteworthy. Think about when the film stressed his Muslim faith (for example, his speech to Victoria about the principle of “service” as underscored in the Quran) and when it stressed “Hindustani” aspects of his character (as in the language lessons). Did you respond to Abdul as someone who united traits of many cultures within India, or did it seem instead like the film was too general in how it portrayed him, in ways that didn’t add up?

Florence: The trip to Italy to meet Puccini allows the film to include that brief recital from *Manon Lescaut* (“a story of lovers separated by a class divide...”), which also prompts Queen Victoria to speak on behalf of the filmmakers in stating her preference for lighter comedy. It’s also a kind of homecoming for Dench’s film career, which got a big boost in *A Room with a View*.

Camera and Sound: In the scene after they dance on the patio, expressing their fond feelings for each other, Dench and Fazal are filmed in close proximity. We don’t *quite* inhabit their points of view, but we come close, with Victoria looking up at Abdul (making him look tall and imposing) and him looking down on her (describing herself as an old woman who hasn’t been this happy for years). Their rapport is shaken by the sudden revelation of Abdul having a wife, at which point all sound drops out of the scene except the dialogue—exacerbating the sudden chill and tension in this conversation, which clearly throws Victoria for a loop. The film will repeat a similar trick when she gives her climactic monologue (“I am *anything* but insane!”) with no music or background noise, though the end of that scene finally explodes into strings.

Threshold of Revelation: Victoria is even more rattled to discover later in the film that Abdul has misled her into thinking that the Indian people love her. She finds out that 2,000 white British subjects were killed during an Indian mutiny and that a *fatwa* was declared against Victoria’s own life. This is the kind of detail that has sat uneasily with many critics of *Victoria & Abdul*, which makes a big plot point of Victoria “discovering” the violent truths of imperialism, but *not* in relation to the many, many, many more Indian people who died under this system.

Sexuality and Reproduction: At several moments, Victoria lists her ambivalent motherhood and her particular dislike of Bertie as prominent among the downsides of being queen. Despite that grievance, she is perhaps surprisingly eager for other characters to reproduce, quickly calling the royal doctor to perform an unrequested vaginal exam on Abdul’s wife. That plotline soon leads to Dr. Reid’s exam of Abdul himself, in which he recoils in half-comic horror at the sight of Abdul’s penis: “I did not do seven years at Edinburgh University to look at an Indian’s dick!” What did you make of Victoria’s nose-*at-best*, ruthless-*at-worst* interest in Abdul’s and his wife’s sexual and reproductive health, and of the film’s execution of these scenes?

Lensing: Frears makes an unexpected choice during Victoria’s speech about *not* being insane by using a wide-angle or “fisheye” lens that *does* make her look a bit...buggy. They then use the same lens for close-ups of Prince Bertie and Lord Henry, which makes the whole scene feel heightened and tense. Much more often, the members of Victoria’s court are framed together in group shots, downplaying their individuality and making them a united force against her.