

## Interview: 'The King's Speech' Director Tom Hooper on Colin Firth's Masterful Stutter

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CHICAGO – As “The King’s Speech” will almost certainly earn multiple Oscar nominations in tomorrow’s announcement from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, we bring you this behind-the-scenes glimpse inside the mind of the masterful production.



“The King’s Speech” director Tom Hooper.  
Photo credit: Laurie Sparham, The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com recently interviewed “The King’s Speech” director Tom Hooper about his evocative film on King George VI’s stutter with Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush, Helena Bonham Carter and Guy Pearce. While elocution coaches exist aplenty to help people prevail over a stutter, the 39-year-old Hooper says Colin Firth’s challenge was to spawn one and then conquer it with authenticity.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So, you’ve come a long way since your first film, “Runaway Dog,” at the age of 13...

**Tom Hooper:** Who knew that film would make it into the public consciousnesses. I made it on a clockwork Bolex camera with 100 feet of 16-millimeter film. I ran it at 16 frames a second because I could squeeze in just under four minutes of film. I had a shooting ratio of about 1.5 to one, which will never be repeated.

It was a comedy about a dog that keeps running away based on my cousin’s dog that kept running away. I spent many a weekend in the Oxfordshire countryside running miles through muddy fields cursing this damn dog. That was my brief flirtation with comedy because my next film was about my brother discovering who his grandfather was. He discovered that my grandfather had been killed in a war as a bomber navigator. It was called “Bomber Jacket”.

It was about finding my grandfather’s old bomber jacket. My grandfather was haunted by ghost-like planes. My preoccupation with my grandfather’s untimely death started very young. I dedicated “The King’s Speech” to my grandfather. When people talk about “The King’s

Speech" being a period movie and a historical film, well, yes, but I don't have my grandfather because of that war. And my father didn't have a father because of that war. He was completely affected by that. I find that still very present. It's not distant to me.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** That's why you initially did a lot of work that was true to your own life...

**Hooper:** Yes. And then my third film was called "Countryside". It was about nuclear holocaust, which was my greatest fear as a kid. We were told it was perfectly possible that there could be some sort of Armageddon scenario and we could all be wiped out. The government would advise you to build a nuclear shelter using your kitchen table and some blankets. There was this sense of the utter hopelessness of any defense against any nuclear attack.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** With your Golden Globe-winning "John Adams" on TV (with Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney) and your Golden Globe-winning "Elizabeth I" on TV (with Helen Mirren, Hugh Dancy and Jeremy Irons), are you a history buff still?

**Hooper:** I gave up history at 15. I don't know quite how I've ended up being this person. I mean, it's not everything. I directed "Prime Suspect". I directed "Red Dust," which is a contemporary South African. I directed "EastEnders" and "Cold Feet" when I was very young, which are very gritty and contemporary shows. And even "The Damned United" in 2009 was set in the 1970s.

I think it's really just grown out of the difficulty in finding great material and truly great stories. I find it hard to read original screen fiction that has character writing as good as the stuff I've been doing. If you're making "John Adams" – and our scripts need a lot of work when I first read them – you've got everywhere to go.

There are so many places you can go to in order to make our characters richer. If your minor character is Franklin and you think he's a bit boring in the script, there are books stacked up about how to make Franklin more interesting. But in an original script if your minor characters are boring, your writer hasn't been able to invent them and bring them to life as real people. Then there's nowhere to go.



Colin Firth as King George VI in "The King's Speech".

*Photo credit: Laurie Sparham, The Weinstein Company*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In "The King's Speech," how challenging was it to get Colin Firth to create a stutter and then overcome it?

**Hooper:** Oddly enough, we spent much more time on the script, story, characters and workshopping the script with the actors. The thing we did most was workshop the script. We took a script that was already fabulous and went through it in a room. It's the way I like to work. I use the actors to try it out and improve it.

The truth is we did have speech specialists who came to visit us, but speech therapists are there to help people who stammer to *not* stammer. There are no speech specialists who are trained to make people stammer. It's a myth that there's this magic person you go to. For me, and I think for Colin, the inspiration was the real king.

Initially it was very hard to find any footage, but eventually we found this extraordinary five-minute clip from the 1938 Glasgow empire exhibition. We found a less-edited clip where you saw him stammer. What was so poignant was the look in King George VI's eyes where all

he wants to do is the right thing...

**HollywoodChicago.com:** ...but he can't...

**Hooper:** ...but he can't. And he drowns in his silence. I had tears stinging my eyes at the end of four minutes from this little thing on my computer in a profile shot. It wasn't even a frontal. I just thought: "My god, if it's this emotional, we're fine. If Colin can do this, we're fine." It had avoided all the pitfalls. It's not comedic. It's not too slow. It's not so painful you don't want to watch it. It's mainly just very poignant. Colin's genius was to bottle it.

If you're an actor playing drunk, it's better to concentrate on being sober. You know, I'm going to put the key in the door correctly because I'm not drunk at all. We certainly said it was better for Colin to concentrate on trying *not* to stammer than to stammer. That sounds quite counterintuitive, but I think he found it helpful.

The key decision was the type of stammer. Broadly, there are two. There's the repetitive one where you're saying g... g... g... get out. And then there's the block where you just freeze. We had great descriptions of it. Though it may well start psychologically, what's physically happening is your throat is closing up so there's literally a block. If you suddenly had it right now, you literally wouldn't be able to talk. Though it's psychological, the manifestation is physical. There's actually an oxygen supply that's cut off.



Geoffrey Rush in "The King's Speech".

Photo credit: Laurie Sparham, The Weinstein Company

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What did your script writer's real-life experience with stammering bring to this script?

**Hooper:** The writer, David Seidler, was a huge help. He probably was the most helpful of all. He was a severe stammerer as a child. David was born in 1937. He used to listen to King George VI on the radio. His parents used to say to him: "If the king of England can cope, there's hope for you." He was so connected to the DNA of this story. The king was David's childhood hero. David was brilliant in talking about the humiliation of it and his journey out of it.

David would go to a restaurant and not order the beef because he'd stammer with the waiter. Instead, he'd order the fish. He'd make choices in his daily life just to avoid stammering. In class, the teacher wouldn't ask him to read because he'd be the kid who'd stammer. But in the end, you can analyze it and talk about it all you want and Colin's the only person who can do it. I can't do it for him, but my role was actually to get him to do *more*.

Colin was so scared of it being too much. He was scared about pace. He was scared that the film would have no pace if he'd stammer too much. I felt he didn't understand how poignant and powerful it was. My main role was encouraging Colin to commit to it more while I conducted the level of it.

I asked him to let me worry about how much he's doing it. I wanted him to be in the moment of the stammering and not worrying if he was doing it too much. The point about stammering is you aren't in control. A stammerer doesn't have that choice. I wanted Colin to abandon himself to it and let me worry about if it was too much. I felt that was important psychologically.

About halfway through the shoot, Colin ceased having the ability to choose to stammer or not. He started to stammer any way, which really was an amazing moment. And then in his normal life, it started to happen, too. He went to an awards ceremony for "A Single Man" and the

next morning he'd come back and say he stammered. He won an award for "A Single Man," went up on stage for the acceptance speech and started stammering without being able to stop it.

Derek Jacobi, who played Archbishop Cosmo Lang in "The King's Speech," played the most famous television stammerer ever in "I, Claudius". Derek said to Colin that it's infectious. When Derek finished that part, he said it took him seven or eight months for it to come out of his system.

We all hesitate, actually. It's a bit like Asperger's. There's probably a spectrum to stammering. Stammerers use their hands and arms a lot. Moving helps to get it out. We all have little hesitations. That's the way into it and you build up from there.



Colin Firth (left) and Helena Bonham Carter in "The King's Speech".

Photo credit: Laurie Sparham, The Weinstein Company

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Just like his methods were unorthodox in the film, talk about the unorthodox way Geoffrey Rush was convinced to join the cast of "The King's Speech".

**Hooper:** It preexisted me. This started off as a play that was going nowhere. It was a non-produced play in a little theater. It was something they were trying to do and never did do. One of the people in the theater company happened to have an Australian friend who lived two streets away from Geoffrey and knew his street address.

The play script was delivered in a brown paper envelope like an orphaned child to Geoffrey's doorstep one Christmas morning in 2007. It came with an unsolicited note saying: "Dear Mr. Rush. You don't know us, but would you read our play?" Amazingly, he did not throw it in the rubbish bin. He read it immediately, called his agent and said: "Not as a play, but I'd love to do it as a movie." It breaks all the rules.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Talk about the ratings for "The King's Speech" in different regions of the world and the issues you had specifically with the MPAA in the U.S.

**Hooper:** I'm upset.

In the UK, this is a family movie. In Australia, this is a family movie. In Canada, this is a family movie. Our box office is astronomical in the UK. In its first eight days of release, "The King's Speech" surpassed the entire box office of "The Queen". It's already the highest-grossing film in the history of its distributor. It's kept pace with a film like "Notting Hill," which is a massive commercial comedy hit in the UK. That's partly because the whole age range is going from the 9-year-old to the 90-year-old.

Why it's sad to get an "R" rating in the U.S. is that one of the key themes in the movie is how not to let scars, bullying and trauma from childhood to go unaddressed and define your entire life. That's what this film is about. It's about two middle-aged men saying to each other: "You're still locked in the defensive crouch of being five years old. You don't need to have that defensive crouch any more. Those threats are gone. You've got to love your wife and kids now. You've got to let it go."



Guy Pearce in "The King's Speech".

Photo credit: Laurie Sparham, The Weinstein Company

That's a terribly important theme particularly for teenagers and certainly kids to get their head around. It's the idea that they can grow beyond these things. For that reason, I'm very sad. It's ridiculous. The argument goes that violence can be judged by context and language can't. For "True Grit," which I just saw, I was with Ethan Coen doing a roundtable. He said he needed to do some trims in that scene where that bugger gets shot. So, it's OK to see someone shot at point-blank range with a few cuts. In that context, it's OK.

But with language, there's no context. It's just arithmetic. One "fuck" is a "PG-13" and two or more "fucks" is an "R". Well, I could say one bloke shot at point-blank range is a "PG-13" and two or more blokes shot at point-blank range is an "R". You could use that argument.

The "f" word in our movie is used in a therapeutic context. It's not used in its sexual sense. It's not used in its aggressive sense. It's used as an unblocking mechanism. David Seidler, the writer, found this technique hugely helpful as a kid in the 1940s. If you talked to David, he'd say it was his breakthrough moment. He'd say: "Fuck everyone. I'm fucking well going to speak. And if I fucking stammer, you're going to fucking miss it."

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did it cross your mind to cut this language from the film?

**Hooper:** No. Never. I'm not going to be censored. I'm not going to be a slave to a rating. In the end, the truth is out. In a weird way, then I've only publicized the problem by not changing it. If I changed it, no one would know I've changed it. In England, the certificate of the film says "12A" and it "contains strong language used in the context of speech therapy". That is on the certificate for the movie.

In the U.S., the MPAA's whole worry is precedent. They worry: Then what about every other film with a "fuck"? But the precedent is pretty small if you're talking about films that use "fuck" in the context of speech therapy. There's probably going to be one film every 20 years.

*"The King's Speech" from director Tom Hooper and writer David Seidler stars Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush, Helena Bonham Carter, Guy Pearce, Derek Jacobi, Robert Portal, Richard Dixon, Paul Trussell, Adrian Scarborough, Andrew Havill, Charles Armstrong, Roger Hammond, Calum Gittins, Jennifer Ehle, Dominic Applewhite and Ben Wimsett. The film, which is rated "R" in the U.S. for some language, opened in the U.S. on Dec. 10, 2010 with a running time of 118 minutes.*



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