

History by Rote in Formulaic 'Victoria and Abdul'

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There have been 155 TV/Movie depictions of Queen Victoria, who ruled England from 1837 to 1901. The “Victorian Era” continues to fascinate filmmakers, and who is perfect to portray Queen V. towards the end of her life? Get me Dame Judi Dench on the Skype!

This is a story of a little known chapter of her later life... her unlikely relationship with a footman from India, Abdul Karim. In the film, it is hinted that the history of this friendship was destroyed for image purposes, but enough of the events were recorded to adapt into a film (from a book by Shrabani Basu). Veteran director Stephen Frears (“Florence Foster Jenkins”) applies his usual workmanlike approach to narrative, but nothing comes to life in the situation. No offense to the great Judi D., but the formula presented in the film almost seemed like a satire, with the elder actress of course portraying the title character of an ancient queen. The supporting cast does lend a better hand, especially comedian Eddie Izzard as heir to the throne, Albert “Bertie” Edward. Except for the apparent destruction of this chapter in Victoria’s life, the story doesn’t grab.

Queen Victoria (Judi Dench) has hit a rut. Her kingdom is close to a billion people, but at the end of the 1890s her long reign – combined with old age – has become lonely and boring. It’s time for a surprising happenstance, and it comes in the form of Abdul Karim (Ali Fazal), a subject of the colony of India. His participation in a ceremony piques Victoria’s interest.



Title Characters Victoria (Judi Dench) and Abdul (Ali Fazal)

Photo credit: Universal Pictures International

The Queen is so fascinated that she invites Abdul to be a footman in her entourage. Their friendship as a result of this unlikely pairing infuriates Victoria's son Prince Bertie (Eddie Izzard), the heir to her throne. The situation gets so tense that the Prince draws up papers to declare his mother insane, which inflames the situation all the way to Victoria's death in 1901.

There is nobody except Judi Dench who can play Victoria at this point in her life, and that casting does give the film the air of a wink at the camera. She does a decent job with the character, but the story first is all about her being comically bored, then being bewitched by her new friendship, and finally being angry when it falls apart. Dame Dench seems to be following rather than leading in the performance, and while this lion of acting still roars, the sound is a bit muted.

Abdul is portrayed by Ali Fazal, a Bollywood actor who had a bit part in "Furious 7" in 2015. His role as Victoria's supplicant is a tad angelic, but the film wants to make him the misunderstood hero of the realm, and he delivers with a constant smile and accent that is a reminder of Apu from "The Simpsons." It's hard to detect a chemistry between him and Judi D., but it doesn't affect a story that goes from A-to-Z by rote rather than subtlety.



He is Not Amused: Eddie Izzard as the Prince of Wales in 'Victoria and Abdul'

Photo credit: Universal Pictures International

There are some nice turns from the supporting cast, with the always welcome Michael Gambon as Lord Salisbury, Victoria's prime minister. His gruff perplexity of the elder Queen is deftly delivered. The surprising performance came from comedian Eddie Izzard as Albert "Bertie" Edward, who before Charles had the longest reign as Prince of Wales. Izzard's portrayal of Bertie's jealousy at his mother's relationship with Abdul is properly Freudian, and his anger at trying to end the coupling expressed that it was the Prince, rather than his mother, who was insane.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and Victoria had that spirit in the dour pictures of her from the early photography of the 19th Century. To quote her, and as I would guess she would say about this review, "We are not amused."

"Victoria and Abdul" expanded to Chicago on September 29th. Featuring Judi Dench, Ali Fazal, Michael Gambon, Tim Pigott-Smith and Eddie Izzard. Screenplay adapted by Lee Hall, from the book by Shrabani Basu. Directed by Stephen Frears. Rated "PG-13"



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