

ARTS

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In 'Elizabeth: The Golden Age' England's Protestant queen (played by Cate Blanchett) is portrayed as a semi-divine icon sent to frighten off the priests of Rome

An offensive lack of merit



Elizabeth: The Golden Age
12A CERT, 114 MINS

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

At *The Catholic Herald* we are known for our temperate reviews. No rampant book-burners we; no cross-toting, finger-wagging, blasphemy-calling inquisitors in this neck of the woods. Certainly we will defend ourselves when under attack, and we will ensure that we perceive to be wrong, but we strive to do so with the measured calm that true confidence allows.

That is why, when a *Daily Mail* reporter rang me last week to find out if the Catholic community was "outraged" by the new film, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, I took great pleasure in denying her the tabloid quotes she was after. Is *The Golden Age* anti-Catholic, she asked? Of course it is. Will that upset the Catholic community in this country? Not overly, I suspected; they are more likely to be upset by the absence of artistic merit than by the ludicrous villainy of every Catholic cast member. British Catholics are a tough bunch, you know, and highly discerning but,

Let us start with the presentation of King Phillip II of Spain. Previously the Prince Consort of Queen Mary (and let's not forget, at one time a suitor for Elizabeth's hand), the unglamorous reality must surely be that this man was an actor in the realpolitik of the time. Shekhar Kapur's production instead delights in the worst excesses of the "Black Legend"; he is shown to be a wicked fellow, bow-legged and clad in black, constantly surrounded by monks mumbling ominous prayers, pacing through cathedrals in a perpetual state of disquieting religiosity. To top off this melange of voodoo magic and man's own superstition, he carries a miniature doll of Elizabeth, on which to cast his murky spells. It is a preposterous parody of the Catholic stereotype that has prevailed through the ages.

The Babington conspiracy, meanwhile, the most famous of the conspiracies against Queen Elizabeth and the one that led directly to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, is portrayed in similarly parodic terms. Historically Babington was a young fool who was partly duped by Elizabeth's spy chief Walsingham into planning a plot, simply to require Mary to be executed. But although Babington himself (Eddie Redmayne) is presented as appropriately young and naive, he and the plotters are shown as wicked Catholics, performing ritual executions of their own, constantly praying and being so fervently religious that they are on the verge of tears most of the time. Instead of being foiled, Babington succeeds in shooting Elizabeth, although mysteri-

ously his pistol is unloaded; dressed in white, Elizabeth almost seems to have been saved by divine intervention. This is the heart of the eccentricity of this flawed film: instead of a political story like its excellent predecessor *Elizabeth*, this is told as a story of good and evil. And evil, in this case, means Catholic. Queen Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) is worshipped by the camera as a semi-divine icon, clad in such exquisite dresses that it is worth going to see this film just for the costumes, and shot from such consistently dramatic angles

Shekhar Kapur's production delights in the worst excesses of the 'Black Legend'

—backlit by sunlight, perched on the edge of a cliff like Moses — that each frame has the sumptuous value of an oil painting. The feeling, by the end, is that she was placed on earth by a higher power as a beautiful icon to frighten off the priests of Rome.

Blanchett, of course, is excellent. Without doubt, she is the greatest actress of her generation. But I hated to see her misused in this way. Instead of unleashing her grandeur at a few choice moments, the script and direction demand that she is at her most epic almost all the time. The result is compounded by the over-luxurious filming and costumes, is deliriously over the

top. Every moment attempts to be epoch-making, with Elizabeth, dressed in vermilion or azure, saying something eminently quotable but barely audible over the rampant violins. It is hammy beyond belief.

The love affair with Sir Walter Raleigh, apart from having no basis in history, is actually relatively well handled. Clive Owen is suitably thuggish, and there are some much-needed moments of self-knowing humour, such as when Sir Walter is describing the life of an adventurer to the Queen, on a background of thick string music, and is suddenly interrupted: the music stops abruptly, and on the Queen's instruction the story resumes, along with the music. It is a nice little moment as it "owns up" to the schmaltz of it all. And at least the two of them don't "get it together" — just a single kiss — which is a wise decision.

Given the amount being packed in — Elizabeth's love affair, the Babington plot against her, Mary's execution — it was unwise to cover the war with Spain as well. It would have been better left reported by a messenger in the style of a Greek tragedy. But off we go into the ocean for a 15-minute, rather half-hearted battle sequence, with a lot of CGI and not a lot of point. Suddenly Elizabeth is in full body armour shouting at the troops on horseback like Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*.

Nobody would mind the caricaturing of the Catholic elements if it made for a great film. Unfortunately it is just one symptom of a melodramatic reflex that ends up spoiling the whole show.

Sieneese art has the intimacy of a whisper

ART REVIEW
Alan Caine

Renaissance Siena: Art for a City

NATIONAL GALLERY, UNTIL JANUARY 13

The title *Art for a City* is, I would guess, unlikely to thrill. But when the city is Renaissance Siena a sense of excitement takes hold. Artists whose eyes are open to the human drama which surrounds them tell us even more than they intend. And when they catch the force of faces, figures and places — as well as the realm of the spirit — we are willing to stop, look and be amazed. It is not simply "information" which is presented in Sieneese art, but energy, delight in colour and pattern, and an attitude towards the human and the divine. Art matters, and in 1311, when Duccio's great altarpiece, the *Maesta*, was carried through the streets in a solemn procession to the cathedral while bells in the city rang, it bore the inscription: "Holy Mother of God, be the cause of peace to Siena, of life to Duccio because he has painted thee thus."

This exhibition of art and artefacts covers a period from 1460 to 1530. Duccio and his immediate descendants are long dead, but much of their attitude survives in images sacred and secular surmises here, since the focus is not the nature of Sieneese art. Words like "tenderness", "delight", "touching" or "moving" come to mind. Even in a small panel (part of a predella) by Matteo di Giovanni (1476), where a pain-filled crucifixion is portrayed in a shattered landscape, the message seems intimate and reflective.

The Virgin Mary is a prominent image in Siena, as in St Bernardino and St Catherine, who were canonised in 1450 and 1461. Neroccio di Bartolomeo, Landi's statue of St Catherine (1474) seems a conventional religious statue. But only at a glance. It is black and white with a touch of red. The hand which holds her book presses. The face has intensity and focus. There is a body under her garments. Piety does not need to be projected on to her; she is a presence.

The centrepiece of room two is a work from the National Gallery's collection, Matteo di Giovanni's *Assumption of the Virgin* altarpiece

(1474). Two side panels from the town of Asciano have been reunited with it for this exhibition. St Augustine and St Michael the Archangel. Their presence widens the base of the golden Assumption and accentuates its upward sweep. The delicately robust image of the Virgin and of heavenly angels, colourful and lyrical, holds a Sieneese gentleness. Below, on the thin stretch of almost barren ground, next to the empty marble tomb, St Thomas looks up, tensely, to catch the rhythmically snaking girdle dropped from heaven. The saints on either side are clearly based on actual men and are conscious of things unseen.

Another artist whose name is unfamiliar to most of us, Francesco di Giorgio, handles both classical and religious subjects, as a painter, sculptor and draughtsman. The Sieneese qualities show through: delicacy of line and the use of gently spiralling upward movements. A careful attention to details of landscape and figure make di Giorgio's drawings as sensitive as whispers. His large (about half life-size) *Male Nude with a Snake* (1490/95) is classical in form and probably created for a fountain. The curling snake in his hand merges with the strong nude image, which is noble in its poise. His eyes look upwards; his earthly body is only a part of the story.

The artist catches the Sieneese lyrical spirit in a classical mode. His bronze relief of *The Flagellation of Christ* conveys the same sense of physical actuality. Violence is not denied, but almost intensified by understatement.

This powerful relief sculpture is displayed next to one by the Florentine, Donatello, entitled *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, from the Victoria and Albert Museum. This is the work of a Renaissance genius with a level of emotional intensity and complexity which differs from the Sieneese spirit — but it is staggering.

The last room of the exhibition is dedicated to Domenico Beccafumi (1484-1551). The temperature changes in this gallery. An overall sense of the dramatic prevails; the colours are sometimes like bouquets of sweet peas, and cloth often turns petal-like. Many of the figures have a skin-like quality, and the smudged edges seem dream-like. With strong contrasts of light and dark, we catch a sense of high drama in both sacred and classical subjects — and this can arrest us.

However, the humanity of most figures has been sacrificed to delicate out-of-focus prettiness, and this sweetness dilutes any power to move us deeply. A long time has passed since Duccio's *Maesta* was heralded. In 1506 it was removed from Siena's cathedral.

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Elegance but no real wit

THEATRE REVIEW

Present Laughter

NATIONAL THEATRE (LYTTLETON)

When I think of Noël Coward I think of an elegant man in an elegant dressing gown, elegant conversation and elegant wit with more sparkle than substance.

Present Laughter is the quintessential expression of all that. Garry Essendine, played by Alex Jennings, is a matinee idol, surrounded by female adoration and exhibiting a swollen ego which fills the stage. He is blasé but bored; he despises his female sycophants on whose adoration his whole being depends. But, by the end of the play, it has at least begun to dawn on him that he is a shell without substance.

Coward wrote the play in 1939 in a world which was crumbling on every side. In fact the original production had to be suspended until 1942, when he played it to full houses, alternating with *This Happy Breed*; those who saw both at the time must have been impressed by the contrast between the social values displayed. Essendine's world there is no sign of war — no blackout, free-flowing alcohol, domestic staff, and even the sophistication, for the period, of coffee served in a household in which there was no tea to be found.

There is no escaping the simple fact that this is a poor

play. It cannot make up its mind whether it is a bleak comedy. Essendine's growing insight into his own shallowness, or a poor imitation of a Feydeau farce. The two paradigms do not sit well together; they subtract rather than complement. There is good cause to be had — take *Boeing Boeing* revived earlier this year, or *Noises Off*, which was a classic of the genre. And subtle plays about journeys of internal conversion are a staple.

So we are left with the wit. Kenneth Tynan noted in 1976 that Coward's wit owed little to Wilde or Labouchère. And in a world with Frayn and Stoppard, Coward is, by comparison, banal: a mild prick rather than the subcutaneous injection of real wit.

Notwithstanding the questionable quality of the play, it was an excellent production. This production was directed by Howard Davies. The sharply perspective set, designed by Tim Hatley, drew worthy applause from the audience, and the pace of the production never lagged. Since it ran for some three hours the speed of the action was welcome.

There were some fine performances. Alex Jennings is required by the nature of Essendine's part to overact, which he successfully did. His personal assistant, played by Sarah Woodward, was the epitome of the woman who manages the wayward lives of foolish men. Her asperity blended with affection was masterful, and very often more amusing

than the coarse-meshed humour of Sir Henry Stewart. Essendine's previous wife who continued to care enough to rescue him from the theatre, was crisp and convincing. Pip Carter, as Roland Maule, the intellectual stalker with a vice-like handshake, conveyed the manic intensity of an intellectual whose brain has spent some time in a food mixer.

Indeed, there were moments when something worthwhile was nearly said. Essendine's remark that he did not so much participate as watch himself participating implied a depth which needed exploration. In a sense this throwaway thought was the key to the play, but swiftly buried under a sea of froth. "I think there's always something sad about being happy" was the kind of sub-Wildean perverse aphorism which comes at two-a-penny but will always draw a laugh from an unreflex audience. The cruelty of the careless sex activity in the demi-monde reminded us that this is not just a modern phenomenon.

And undoubtedly the audience enjoyed it. They laughed all through and were rich in their applause. This was confirmed as a button-holed people of different ages for their opinions as they left the theatre: "That should bring the charabancs in," said my guest as we left. Which just about sums it up.

Quentin de la Bédouère

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