

FROM THE ACCLAIMED DIRECTOR OF
'THE QUEEN' AND 'PHILOMENA'

HISTORY'S MOST
UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP



ACADEMY AWARD WINNER

JUDI DENCH

ALI FAZAL

VICTORIA & ABDUL

BASED ON AN EXTRAORDINARY TRUE STORY

FOCUS
FEATURES
A CORAL COMPANY

WORKING TITLE

BBC FILMS

DOLBY
DIGITAL
IN SELECTED THEATRES

UNIVERSAL
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IN CINEMAS SEPTEMBER 15

ABOUT VICTORIA & ABDUL

The extraordinary true story of an unexpected friendship in the later years of Queen Victoria's (Academy Award winner Judi Dench) remarkable rule. When Abdul Karim (Ali Fazal), a young clerk, travels from India to participate in the Queen's Golden Jubilee, he is surprised to find favour with the Queen herself. As the Queen questions the constrictions of her long-held position, the two forge an unlikely and devoted alliance with a loyalty to one another that her household and inner circle all attempt to destroy. As the friendship deepens, the Queen begins to see a changing world through new eyes and joyfully reclaims her humanity.

VICTORIA & ABDUL

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INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND AT

victoriaandabdul.co.uk



VICTORIA & ABDUL IN CINEMAS SEPTEMBER 15

FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

BAFTA Award-winning filmmaker Beeban Kidron read a newspaper article about Shrabani Basu's book *Victoria & Abdul* in 2010 and was immediately taken with the tale. She remarks, "What intrigued me was that here was a previously untold history, a gem hidden away for over a century...The reaction within her royal household was quite telling, and relevant to what's going on now in the world - about acknowledging tension between cultures and having open-mindedness."

Lee Hall, the Academy Award-nominated screenwriter of *Billy Elliot*, was equally intrigued. Kidron notes, "Lee's story is a delightful confection but at its heart stands a deeply touching relationship. That's what he loves to do in his storytelling: make the audience laugh and then make them cry."

The ability to parse both the weight of history and impart a witty perspective on same is a hallmark of Academy Award-nominated director Stephen Frears' work. Kidron always wanted him to take the helm. She says, "I knew he would be great for *Victoria & Abdul* because he gets at the humour in situations yet he doesn't lose sight of the seriousness."

When thoughts turned to identifying an actress who could embody the stature, pride, probing intelligence, wit, and fragility of "the Grandmother of Europe" there was really only one person anyone had in mind. Frears, having collaborated with Dame Judi Dench previously, knew her to be "a brilliant actress - and one who looks like Victoria!"



Casting the young man who would share the screen with a doyenne of acting called for a worldwide consideration of talent. "We were looking for a fresh face," notes Kidron. "Ali [Fazal] was not known to us, but he is well-known in India." Fazal himself reflects, "Abdul came from a place of innocence and I wanted to keep that throughout. Yet he still has layers to him, and Lee's script shows those nuances."

As to his own approach and overview, Frears says, "I try to be instinctive. You just honour the material and, gradually, it gives you its secrets. What came clear for this story was how very funny and very tender it was but how there would be a trace of tragedy." BAFTA Award-winning film editor Melanie Ann Oliver concurs. She notes, "What became clear very quickly was the importance of the humour...The greatest joy was seeing it with an initial preview audience, watching them pick up on the humour and really understand the message."

Kidron adds, "Different people can have different takes on India and England, and on Victoria and her reign; this is only one tale from a multitude of stories. But we have tried to show you Queen Victoria like you've never seen her before."



A PORTRAIT OF HISTORY

Who gets to write history? Usually, it's the people with power - but sometimes, their wishes die with them. When Queen Victoria died in 1901, one of the most important chapters in her life was erased, and it took more than a hundred years and some intrepid journalism to recover it.

During a visit to Osborne House on the centenary of Victoria's death, journalist Shrabani Basu noticed a portrait of a handsome young Indian man. It struck her that he had been painted to look more like a nobleman than a servant. 'The artist seemed to have captured the Queen's romantic vision of the subject. I later learned that Queen Victoria had loved the painting so much she had copied it herself'

Basu's quest to find out more about the man in the portrait took her to Agra and then to the archives of Windsor Castle. Here she found the Queen's Urdu journals from her lessons with Abdul Karim, which had survived her family's purge of their correspondence. 'It was as if an entire chapter of history - that the political establishment had tried to destroy - was lying in front of me: the story of an unknown Indian servant and his Queen, of an Empire and the Jewel in the Crown, and above all, of love and human relationships.'

Now that this story has been told through Basu's book, and on the big screen in **Victoria & Abdul**, Abdul Karim's place in history can be restored again. The true tale of this unlikely friendship has the power to upend what we think we know about the past - and to challenge how we see ourselves today.

WHO WAS ABDUL KARIM?



Clerk, servant, gentleman, exotic curiosity, social climber, wise man, fraud, opportunist, teacher, spy, loyal friend...

At one point or another, the people around Abdul Karim chose to see him as each of these things. As a foreign visitor in England at a time when Indians were often exoticised at best and deeply distrusted at worst, he must have felt boxed in by people's prejudices. More than a century later, with so much evidence of Abdul's life either destroyed or soaked in bias, it can seem hard to truly know this man who sparked such passionate controversy.

Abdul's journals - which formed part of the inspiration for **Victoria & Abdul** - offer glimpses into his thinking. These diaries tell of his initial homesickness, and his surprise at being expected to do servant's work in England after his position as a clerk back in India. We learn from Abdul's writings that he asked the Queen at this time whether he could go home, and only stayed at her request, putting paid to the idea that he was an opportunist looking to take advantage of her favour.

A passage written by Abdul in the Queen's Urdu journal reveals a man who seems genuinely devoted to Victoria, heaping praise on her 'wisdom and fine senses' and thanking her for defending him against his enemies in the royal household. 'You are wholly good, honest and truthful,' he wrote in 1899 after the Queen's 80th birthday. 'You have been gracious enough to take me in your service. And have been gracious during all these years.'

Abdul also wrote here about the 'jealousy and prejudice' which he saw against Muslims and Islam around the world, and which he experienced personally at court. His own diaries, interestingly, don't go into this more unpleasant side of his life in England - perhaps because the topic was painful for him.

Abdul's personal journals end with his wish that 'the perusal of this little work be attended with some interest or pleasure to the person into whose hands it may chance to fall' - a wish which history has certainly granted. As with any figure from the past there will always be gaps in our knowledge about Abdul. But the story of his extraordinary life speaks for itself.

REFLECT

After watching the film, take some time to reflect on the experience and your reactions. You might want to watch the trailer to refresh your memory - see

victoriaandabdul.co.uk/videos



01

What did you think of the way we were introduced to Victoria and Abdul at the beginning of the film? What impression do we get of their different lives?

02

How did you react to Judi Dench's portrayal of Queen Victoria? What qualities did Ali Fazal bring to the role of Abdul?

03

How does *Victoria & Abdul* portray the world of the royal court? What things are important to people there? Could you see any parallels with our society today?

04

What are some of the most important moments in Victoria and Abdul's friendship? How are they changed by knowing each other?

05

What sort of emotional journey did the film take you on? What emotions were you left with when the credits rolled?

DISCUSS

Talk about some of the themes and ideas in the film with your group.

01

Queen Victoria has wealth and status, but still feels isolated and even marginalised in her own court. How does the film portray her unique experience as a woman in power? How might this reflect - or contrast with - the experiences of women around the world today?

‘Women around the world today are prevented from accessing decision making structures, and their voices blocked by cultural and structural factors. Globally only 22% of women hold positions in the national Parliament of their countries, and hold significantly less management and board positions than men. In the UK, only 29% of parliamentarians in the House of Commons are women.’

- Mothers' Union

02

Abdul experiences hostility as well as welcome upon his arrival in England. How might this reflect the experiences of people coming to the UK as immigrants or as refugees today? What does it truly mean to ‘welcome the stranger’ (Deuteronomy 10:19)?

03

Victoria is eager to learn ‘Hindustani’ (Urdu) from Abdul. How does mutual curiosity and good communication help to build up their relationship? What common ground do they share, despite their differences?

04

Victoria & Abdul portrays a friendship which crosses boundaries of age, gender, race, culture, religion and class - changing lives as a result. What possibilities might be created when two very different cultures, or individuals, are ‘reconciled’ in this way? How could this impact on family life?

05

Why are Christians in particular called to build bridges of friendship to those who are different from us? Where could this kind of reconciliation be needed in global situations today, and in your own life?

‘As Christians, we are called to represent God as His ambassadors, including in reconciliation; both by encouraging people to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ; and by reconciling people to one another, revealing the Kingdom of God through restored relationships.’

- Mothers' Union



Mothers' Union was established in 1876. From the outset it recognised that strong relationships and the role of family, however defined, are crucial in building healthy communities. Its first Royal Patron was Her Majesty Queen Victoria from 1898. It aims to show Christian faith by the transformation of communities worldwide, through the promotion of stable marriage and family life.

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