



**[The King's Speech](#) at [Cornerhouse](#)**

**Director, Tom Hooper; with Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helena Bonham Carter, at various venues around Manchester including Cornerhouse.**

**Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) January 2011**

'The King's Speech' is one of the first big films of the year and is already a hot tip for the Oscars – it's triumph is to make you forget that this is a British costume drama and appreciate it as the story of a profoundly damaged man, who achieves private happiness through his wife and children, and finally public success with the help of his first real friend.

British actors, trained in a theatrical tradition, are celebrated for their use of language – Colin Firth here is an actor and a man robbed of his voice.

This film is based on the life of George VI, a man crippled by the repressive upper-class English society and a uniquely horrible upbringing, who unexpectedly became King following his brother's affair and marriage to Wallis Simpson, a twice divorced woman. The political and social events are presented somewhat simplistically and sometimes laboured, but the history is obviously not familiar to all the audience. For the majority of the film one is caught up in the personal struggle of the man and how the love, firstly of his wife and then his Australian speech therapist, helped him beat his own demons and find his voice.

Raised by a father, George V who used fear to govern his family, the young Prince Albert was knock-kneed (corrected by metal splints), left handed (beaten out of him) and abused by a series of nannies (one of whom starved him for three years, before his parents noticed), the adult man could barely utter a sentence without stuttering and in public was reduced to virtual incoherence. As the Royal Family entered an age of mass media and public performance this handicap became more important, especially when his brother David - the heir to the throne, showed that he would pursue his own happiness, rather than his duty. The tragedy of the future King George was that he was forced into a public role at a time when he appeared to have found private happiness with his wife Elizabeth and his two daughters.



It is this private story of his struggle which involves us, at times it is almost painful to hear and by the closing moments we are willing the king to speak. It is the triumph of the three leading actors to make the real people real once more – as in Tom Hooper's earlier bio-pic of Brian Clough – we forget we are watching history and are caught up in the human story. Firth plays, with heartbreaking vulnerability, a man fighting to fulfil his duty with the support of a loving wife and the first man who treats him as another human being rather than a prince.

Bonham Carter gives depth to a woman whose public image is so familiar, but whose real strength and character were hidden. And Geoffrey Rush impresses as the therapist who challenges 'Mr Johnson' (Prince Albert's initial alias) to face his past and who builds a relationship of equals with a man who has always been treated as better or worse than human.

The supporting cast contains many familiar British and Australian faces, the most successful portrayals are of the historical characters who have appeared most rarely on the screen. Michael Gambon can create his own George V, a dictatorial man who realises that his family must change to preserve its role, meet the demands of the media and perhaps to save the nation in the coming conflict with Nazism and Communism. By contrast Timothy Spall faces the thankless task of portraying Churchill.

The Windsor myth is that becoming king led to George's early death – although it was more likely due to his chain smoking, recommended by his doctors – 'as cigarettes cleared the larynx'. This film shows another truth that the King's Speech ultimately unites a nation to fight for its survival, and that the voice of freedom, created by the love of a wife and a teacher, can overcome the voice of dictatorship – of the evil words of one of the century's most effective orators – Adolf Hitler.

And my own Oscar prediction, well, Judi Dench won for Elizabeth I and Helen Mirren for Elizabeth II, and I think Colin Firth, following his nomination for 'A Single Man', is a hot favourite to make it a royal hat-trick.