

The physician at the movies

Peter E. Dans, MD



Geoffrey Rush, Colin Firth (as Prince Albert/King George VI), and Helena Bonham Carter in *The King's Speech* (2010).
The Weinstein Company./Photofest.

The King's Speech

Starring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush, Helena Bonham Carter, Guy Pearce, and Derek Jacobi.

Directed by Tom Hooper. Rated R and PG. Running time 118 minutes.

A box-office favorite with an uplifting coherent story wins the Academy Award as Best Picture. Stop the presses! The film chronicles the transformation of the Duke of York (Colin Firth), who looks like “a deer in the headlights” as he stammers and stutters before a large crowd at Wembley Stadium at the closing of the Empire Exhibition in 1925, to his delivery of a speech that rallies a nation at war in 1939. The doctors who attend to what they call tongue-tiedness advocate cigarette smoking to

help him relax his vocal cords and to give him confidence in anxious moments. He is also told to put pebbles in his mouth like Demosthenes was said to have done to speak over the waves. All that does is make him almost choke to death.

His concerned wife, Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), poses as a Mrs. Johnson to enlist the aid of an unorthodox speech therapist, Lionel Logue, played with gusto by Geoffrey Rush. Firth deserved his Academy Award for his excellent job in reproducing the disability and capturing the Duke's diffidence while maintaining his awareness of being a royal. Still, it is Rush who makes the movie come alive and has the best lines, some from Shakespeare—he apologizes to Mrs. J for the shabbiness of his studio with a line from *Othello* that being “poor and content is rich, and rich enough.” Refusing to disclose her husband's identity, the Duchess tells Logue that



his job requires public speaking. On being told that he can't change jobs, Logue asks if he is an indentured servant and the Duchess responds, "Something like that."

The relationship between the Duke and Logue starts awkwardly as Logue insists that the sessions be conducted in his "castle," according to his rules. He insists that they call one another Lionel and "Bertie," the Duke's familiar name, so that they can be "equal." The Duke responds that if they were equal he wouldn't be there. Later, his father King George V (Michael Gambon), after flawlessly giving a Christmas speech to the nation, tells his son that the advent of microphones and radios has ushered in an era in which "we have to become actors" and "invade" people's homes.

Logue tries to get a personal history but the Duke resists. Told that infants don't stammer, the Duke admits that the affliction began when he was four or five, which apparently is common. He doesn't stammer when he talks to himself or sings, so Logue records him speaking Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be" and then singing it to Mozart. They try tongue twisters to relax his tongue, exercises to strengthen his abdominal muscles, gargling to limber up his throat, and jumping and other exercises to get him to relax and stop being so stiff. When Logue sees him smoking a cigarette, he tells him to stop. Told that his physicians advised it, Logue says, "They're idiots." George VI died at fifty-six, having suffered from coronary and peripheral artery disease and undergone a pneumonectomy for lung cancer.

When his father dies, Bertie is told that his last words were "Bertie has more guts than all his brothers." He laments that his father couldn't say this to his face and recounts that he was left-handed and how the King made him wear painful splints to force him to not use his left hand. He liked building model planes, but had to collect stamps as his father did. The Duke talks about his brother Johnny, "a sweet boy" who had epilepsy and was hidden from view, then died at thirteen. Bertie was reassured that it wasn't "catching" and thus responsible for his ailment. Logue has a way of getting Bertie to unwind by using profanity; it was the profanity that gave the movie an R rating, but the producers then scrubbed it and rereleased the film with a PG rating to gain a wider audience.¹ More about this later.

After a walk in the park with Logue during which the Duke agrees that he knows little of the common man and that the common man knows little of what he goes through, a period of alienation sets in between them. This allows the filmmaker to capsule political events vis-à-vis Germany with scattered snapshots, a technique that one critic called making



Colin Firth in *The King's Speech* (2010). The Weinstein Company./Photofest.

a hash of history.² The love affair of the Duke's brother, King Edward VIII (Guy Pearce), with Wallis Simpson (Eve Best) of Baltimore is also introduced. The Archbishop of Canterbury (Derek Jacobi) says Edward can't marry her, not because she is American, but because she was twice divorced with two living ex-husbands. Edward is portrayed as head over heels in love, very shallow, and sympathetic to the fascists. Simpson's good favor is also being cultivated by the Nazi secretary of State Von Ribbentrop, who sends her carnations daily. Edward finally abdicates on December 30, 1936, to marry Simpson and discharges his last duty as king and emperor.

After becoming King George VI, his daughters Elizabeth and Margaret curtsy rather than run into the welcoming hug he offers. Protestors support Edward but George wins the public over. The King's wife arranges a rapprochement at Logue's apartment and they are reunited at Westminster Abbey to prepare for the coronation. The King tells the Archbishop of Canterbury to skedaddle while he practices with his speech therapist. Before doing so, he confronts Logue about being neither a certified psychologist nor a doctor, but a failed Australian actor. Logue makes a great plea for the pitfalls of credentialism (something our society suffers from) by saying he helped Australians who couldn't speak after returning from World War I by giving them faith in their own voices. He had no credentials, only successful experience. The King's fears are only partially assuaged, thinking that like his forebear King George III who suffered from porphyria and was called Mad George,³ he would be called Mad George The Stammerer. There follows a wonderful scene as Logue goads him into finding his voice, which he displays during his speech to the Empire on the occasion of England's declaration of war with Germany. The closing credits reveal that Logue coached him during this and every speech during the war and they

remained friends for life. Logue was granted a Knighthood and the rank of Commander of the Royal Victorian order of chivalry, which rewards personal service to the monarch.

I especially liked the scenes of the Duke with his children and Logue with his as he tries unsuccessfully to stump them about their knowledge of Shakespeare. I also enjoyed seeing the famous Bovril sign that proclaimed that it “nourishes you to resist flu.” It appeared in many postwar British films when vehicles passed through Piccadilly Circus and also was a reminder of the flu epidemic that devastated the world from 1918 to the early 1920s. A beneficial effect of the film has been the large jump in the number of stutterers seeking therapy.⁴

The scenes with profanity garnered the most publicity. James Lipton, who hosts *Inside the Actor's Studio* with an off-putting pomposity and affectation, gushed over the scenes while interviewing Firth. Ann Hornaday, the *Washington Post* critic, called the rating board members “prigs” for assigning the rating and thus cautioning parents of teenagers against their seeing an otherwise “wholesome and edifying” film.⁵ By contrast, having grown up in the 1930s and 1940s, I couldn't believe that Logue actually used these methods and wondered if it was just the invention of a post-1968 screenwriter inserting his own vulgar and potty-mouth vocabulary into the film to avoid the dreaded G rating and to appeal to hip cinephiles who prefer their films served up “edgy” and loaded with F-bombs. I was happy to learn that “Logue was reputed never to have sworn in front of the king, nor ever to have called him “Bertie.”⁶ As it turned out then, it was the Oscar award-winning screenwriter David Seidler who was responsible, not those so-called “prigs.” In short, my recommendation is to ignore the dubious history as well as the make-believe surrounding Logue's methods and just enjoy the film as entertainment. You might watch for cameo appearances by other fine actors like Anthony Andrews, Claire Bloom, and Jennifer Ehle.

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Anna Paquin and Goran Visnjic in *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*. CBS/Photofest.

The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler

Starring Anna Paquin, Marcia Gay Harden, and Goran Visnjic. Directed by John Kent Harrison. Not rated. Running time 95 minutes.

This low-budget Hallmark made-for-television film does not have the cinematic production values of many Hollywood films, but as the title implies, it has “heart.” It tells the story of Irena Sendler (played by Academy Award winner Anna Paquin), whose physician father took care of patients other Polish doctors refused to care for, many of whom were Jewish. In doing so, he contracted typhus and died in 1917 when she was seven.¹ In gratitude, Jewish community leaders paid for her education and she attended Warsaw University. There she was suspended for three years after opposing the segregation of Jews in what was called the “ghetto bench” system, which began in 1935 and was legalized in 1937, whereby Jewish students were required to sit on the left side of the lecture hall in a section specifically reserved for them.

As the old adage goes, the apple did not fall far from the tree. Irena begins helping Jewish children as director of the Social Welfare Department in Warsaw in 1939 and, once the ghetto is sealed off in 1940, she uses her position to gain admittance. The film opens in 1941 as she enters the ghetto under the cover of inspecting refugees for typhus. She smuggles in food for the children and arranges to transport them out



Shown on right, as Irena Sendler, Anna Paquin in *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*. CBS/Photofest.

to temporary quarters at her home, where her mother Janina Krzyanowska (Marcia Gay Harden) fears for her safety but does not forbid her to help. With the help of a doctor, a monsignor, and sympathetic Poles, Irena manages to place the children in homes, convents, and orphanages. As the noose around the ghetto tightens in the fall of 1942, the Council for the Aid of Jews (Zegota) is established and she becomes director of their department for the care of Jewish children. Unfortunately, by that time 280,000 of the 400,000 Jews in the ghetto had already been deported to Treblinka and other concentration camps.

Some of her staff decides to take on this increasingly dangerous work. The most poignant parts of the film involve Irena trying to overcome the resistance of parents to allow her to take the children and smuggle them to safety. To a heartbroken mother who fears that she'll never see her child again, she promises that she will document where each child was sent and will contact the parents once the war is over. She must also overcome the parents' concern that in releasing their children, they are likely to be brought up as Christians since they must be taught the Sign of the Cross, the Our

Father, and other prayers to maintain their cover. In one dramatic scene, a rabbi is adamant that this fate for his grandchild would be worse than dying while retaining the Jewish faith. He optimistically counts on the fact that they have been left alone and that the Americans have entered the war.

The film shows the various ways Irena smuggled out the children in suitcases, hidden compartments in trucks, and leading them to secret hiding places and exits from the ghetto shown to her by her Jewish college classmate Stefan Zgrzebnski (Goran Visnjic). She takes out one child, Hanna Rozenfeld, played with great conviction by Danuta Stenka, right under the noses of the Gestapo. Finally, in 1943, she is captured by the Gestapo and tortured but refuses to name her comrades, despite having her legs and arms broken. On the way with others to be executed, she is released by a German guard who was bribed by Zegota. Officially listed as dead, she is taken to a safe hiding place where she reunites with her Jewish friend, whom she later marries.

After the war, Irena dug up from its hiding place in her garden the jar containing the names and whereabouts of over 2500 children whom she had shepherded to safety. Sadly,

many of their family members had died, but she remained close to the children who survived. She was persecuted by the Communists after the war because of her collaboration with the Polish nationals who were opposed to both the Nazis and the Communists. It wasn't until 1965, when she was recognized by Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous among the Nations, that she was finally allowed to leave Poland to accept the award in Israel. In 2007 at the age of ninety-seven, she was honored by the new Polish government and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize only to be beaten out by Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. When told that she had not won the award, she said with characteristic humility and grace, "Every child saved with my help is the justification of my existence on this earth and not a title to glory." Clearly, she had both guts and class, not unlike Audrey Hepburn, the namesake of the posthumous humanitarian award she received in 2009 from UNICEF given to those recognized for helping children throughout the world.

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The Red Shoes (1948)

Starring Moira Shearer, Marius Goring, and Anton Walbrook.
Written and directed by Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell. Running time 133 minutes.

With all the hype about *The Black Swan*, I decided to revisit *The Red Shoes*, the all-time classic ballet film. It was one of a wave of British films that began to be shown in so-called "art-house theaters" after World War II. They were joined by other European films from Sweden, Italy, and France and, combined with American film noir, dominated the postwar movie era. The team of Pressburger and Powell were responsible for a number of films like *Black Narcissus*,¹ which were especially noted for the excellent pictorial and surrealistic quality. *The Red Shoes* is a J. Arthur Rank production and at the first sight of the man striking the gong, I'm usually hooked, although Rank apparently wasn't, in that he walked out of the film during its gala premiere.² *The Red Shoes* won the Academy award for art direction, original screenplay, and a musical score that is as lush as the photography, especially as it is played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Sir Thomas Beecham.

The film opens with students rushing to get seats as the doors open for a ballet at Covent Garden. The story revolves around three ambitious principals, a budding

composer, Julian Craster (Marius Goring), whose teacher has appropriated his score for the ballet; a young dancer, Victoria Page (Moira Shearer), who aspires to be a prima ballerina; and an autocratic Russian impresario, Boris Lermontov (Anton Walbrook), who takes "art for art's sake" to its extreme. To a balletomane who considers ballet to be "poetry in motion", he responds that "it is more than that, it is a religion."³ After he takes on Vicky as his protégée (sort of Trilby to his Svengali), he assumes that she should have no other aim than to be the best ballerina ever.

He also takes Julian under his wing after he learns that he had composed the ballet he had just conducted. Lermontov assuages the young man's anger by telling him that it is much more disheartening to have to steal than to be stolen from. At Lermontov's direction, Julian puts together the score for the ballet of *The Red Shoes*, based on a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen in which a peasant girl becomes enamored of a pair of red ballet slippers. After putting them on, the red shoes never tire and they push her to continue dancing as time, love, and life rush by until she finally dies. The ballet is a sensation, but while working together to rehearse it, Vicki and Julian fall in love and decide to marry. She explains to Lermontov that she wants the comfort of a human love. He is aghast because she will never fulfill his aim of her being the greatest dancer the world has ever known. In order to do so, she must fully commit to it, forfeiting even love and life. The impresario goes ballistic and falls into a depression and says he will never let her perform *The Red Shoes* again. He convinces her to return



Moira Shearer and Leonide Massine in *The Red Shoes* (1948). Eagle-Lion Films Inc./Photofest.



From left: Moira Shearer, Robert Helpmann, Anton Walbrook, Esmond Knight, Leonide Massine in *The Red Shoes* (1948).
Eagle-Lion/Photofest.

for one more performance, but tragedy strikes before the performance as the red shoes cast their spell. The distraught impresario opts to stage the ballet but instead of a ballerina he uses a spotlight in her place.

As Lermontov says, “a great impression of simplicity can only be achieved by a great agony of body and spirit,” something that Fred Astaire and Alicia De Larrocha among other great artists would have seconded. That ballet is an extremely demanding profession, both physically and mentally, is attested to by our daughter-in-law Mary Helen Bowers, a member of the New York City Ballet for ten years. In addition to the mental strain chronicled by Gelsey Kirkland in her autobiography *Dancing on my Grave*,⁴ dancers are haunted by concerns about physical injuries especially to feet, legs, and back. Mary Helen, who spent the better part of a year working with Natalie Portman to train her for the role in *The Black Swan* and was acknowledged for it at the Academy Awards, notes that, like many competitive endeavors, ballet is fraught with backstage intrigue, especially in that there can be only one prima ballerina and a limited number of supporting dancers. It’s amazing that something so beautiful and so orchestrated, can be so filled with angst. I recommend *The Red Shoes* both for its beauty and for the stunning performance by Moira Shearer, who had no acting experience and at the time was the second ballerina to Margot Fonteyn at the Sadler Wells Ballet.

It also serves as a reminder of the Russian and French roots of the art form as Lermontov frequently lapses into beautifully spoken French.⁵

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Dr. Dans (AQA, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1960) is a member of *The Pharos’s* editorial board and has been its film critic since 1990. His address is:

11 Hickory Hill Road
Cockeysville, Maryland 21030
E-mail: pdans@comcast.net