

The Genesis of *Elizabeth*

Based on the remarkable story of the rise of the young Elizabeth Tudor to Queen of England, *Elizabeth* depicts the early life of a woman of independent spirit who ascended to the throne in 1558 to a reign of intrigue and betrayal. The conflict of her private passions and personal friendships with her duty, as monarch, to achieve national unity, form the basis of a story that is both heartbreaking and inspiring.

Elizabeth stars Cate Blanchett in the title role, with Academy Award winner Geoffrey Rush as Sir Francis Walsingham; Christopher Eccleston as the Duke of Norfolk; Joseph Fiennes as the Queen's favorite, Lord Robert Dudley; and Richard Attenborough as Sir William Cecil. The distinguished international cast also includes Fanny Ardant, Kathy Burke, Eric Cantona, Vincent Cassel, Daniel Craig, Jamie Foreman, James Frain, Edward Hardwicke, Emily Mortimer, Kelly Macdonald, Terence Rigby, Amanda Ryan, and Sir John Gielgud.

Filmed on location in Northumberland, Derbyshire, North Yorkshire, and at Shepperton Studios, *Elizabeth* is directed by Shekhar Kapur. The producers are Alison Owen, Eric Fellner, and Tim Bevan.

Elizabeth is the latest production from Working Title Films, Britain's most successful production company, which boasts credits that include *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Fargo*, *Bean*, and *The Borrowers*.

Explaining the attraction of bringing *Elizabeth* to the screen, Alison Owen says, "We had often talked about doing a 'modern' film about a historical character. We had discussed Boadicea, Henry VIII, Guy Fawkes, and Cromwell, but I was happy when Elizabeth I was decided upon, as it had so much potential for a modern audience." Tim Bevan adds, "We were keen to do a period movie, but one that wasn't in the recent tradition of what I call 'frock flicks.' We wanted to avoid, as it were, the Merchant Ivory approach, and we thought it would be great to do a picture set in Tudor times, as that was the most exciting of historical periods. We settled on Elizabeth I and her early life, a period that hasn't been particularly well documented on the screen, and one which would give us more dramatic life. We also wanted to stamp a contemporary feel onto our story, and with the early part of her reign being filled with such uncertainty, we decided to structure it as a conspiracy thriller."

Alison Owen continues, "We were a lot more influenced by films like 'The Godfather' than by previous historical dramas. Although it is a film that is very true in spirit to the Tudor times, historical veracity has not been our main point of contact. We have not changed facts but manipulated time periods. In doing so, we have given our film so many things to attract an audience. At the heart of it is a wonderful love story."

She adds, "For me, it was very appealing that the central character is a woman. Her story seemed to have lots of parallels with modern twentieth-century women who are often faced with that choice between career and personal life. It is a dilemma many contemporary women are trying to resolve in their own lives that Elizabeth had to face. She had to give up the chance of marriage and children in order to achieve stability in the country. I thought that was very interesting."

Tim Bevan says, "To bring the elements together, we put the project out to two or three writers, one of whom was Michael Hirst. He reacted to it immediately and worked out a whole construction. It was his idea to end the movie with the Queen painting her face and becoming the icon we all know and the person where most movies about her would start. We commissioned Michael to do a first draft, and although much has evolved since then, the bricks and mortar of the structure of the story were very much laid in that first draft."

With a script in place, Working Title then set out to find a director to take on the challenge of

bringing to the screen a historical-based story with a contemporary feel.

“We put it out to a few English directors,” said Bevan, “but soon decided to widen the net to attract a director who would really interpret it, and not get bogged down with the sort of tradition that we have of our own history. We met with Shekhar Kapur and he immediately responded to the material. Shekhar knew nothing about Elizabeth I when he came to it, and so, in many ways, his journey is the film’s journey. He has learnt about this character and this period of history, and has brought a completely different sensibility to the movie than any western director would have done. It is a fresh approach which an audience will immediately react to. Shekhar is an extremely visual director, and he brings to the project a shooting style that is imaginative and that has great energy.”

The cast of *Elizabeth* is both international and eclectic. Shekhar Kapur was captivated by the then-little-known Australian actress Cate Blanchett after viewing a show-reel of footage from *Oscar and Lucinda*. He knew immediately that he had found his Elizabeth.

“In some movies,” says Tim Bevan, “When you have up-and-coming stars in them, it brings a whole new level of magic to what can happen to that film. For example, with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Hugh Grant turned into a huge star. Similarly, *Wish You Were Here* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* made stars out of Emily Lloyd and Daniel Day-Lewis. If I was a betting man, I would say the same thing is going to happen to Cate Blanchett with this film.”

Coincidental to this, another Australian actor entered the *Elizabeth* casting frame. The role of Sir Francis Walsingham, the Queen’s confidant, called for an actor of extreme power and influence. Academy Award winner Geoffrey Rush was the producers’ first choice.

When it came to the role of the Duke of Norfolk, casting director Vanessa Pereira championed Christopher Eccleston. Although initially not interested in playing in a period film, Eccleston was soon enthused by the script and the prospect of working with Shekhar Kapur.

The important role of the romantic lead was decided after Cate Blanchett screen-tested with a number of young ‘Brit Pack’ actors. The standout was Joseph Fiennes, who was duly cast in the role of Lord Robert Dudley.

“What is good about Geoffrey, Christopher and Joe,” Tim Bevan points out, “is that they are very different. The film is really about the influence these three characters have on Elizabeth’s life. You have Joe as the romantic character, Geoffrey as the almost mystic Walsingham, and Christopher as the ambitious thug and villain. It’s a mix of casting that has worked, and will track well through the movie.”

“On the next level, we have a fantastic backup of actors like Richard Attenborough and Kathy Burke—who establishes a huge presence as Queen Mary—plus some fine French actors: Fanny Ardant as Mary of Guise, Vincent Cassel as the Duc d’Anjou, and Eric Cantona as Monsieur de Foix, the French ambassador.”

To many, soccer star Cantona was a surprising piece of casting, but when Shekhar Kapur went to Paris to meet with various French actors and had lunch with Cantona, he was convinced that Cantona’s physically imposing presence would translate to the screen.

“This is not stunt casting,” Bevan maintains. “It is going back to our original concept of not wanting to see actors popping up who had been seen in other ‘frock flicks.’ It was a deliberate strategy, and one that helps give the film its freshness. The look of the film is extraordinary, and coupled with a very tight story and powerful performances, it is a cracking good yarn—which is basically the first rule of any movie.”