

Miranda Richardson



Miranda Richardson portrays Queen Mary, the emotionally repressed mother of Prince John. A fundamentally inhibited character, she is a loving mother but has great difficulty communicating with her son.

The actress, one of Britain's most gifted screen performers, immersed herself in research for the role and emerged with a clearer, more sympathetic idea about this often-maligned monarch.

"When people hear I'm playing Mary, they say, 'Wasn't she a dragon?' But I've learnt from my research that she wasn't just a crabby old bag. She may never have laughed in public, but that was because she was shy. She felt she wasn't able to express her emotions in public."

Miranda has gained a towering reputation for a number of films, including *Tom And Viv*, *Dance With A*

Stranger, *The Crying Game*, *Enchanted April*, *Damage*, *Empire Of The Sun*, *The Apostle* and *Spider* (Official Selection, Cannes 2002), as well as the unforgettable Queenie in the BBC's *Blackadder*. She says: "Mary had an absolute belief in the idea of duty. She thought that her husband's word was the law and believed in the divine right of kings. Although that view seems old-fashioned to us now, she thought it could not be questioned. Ultimately, I think this film understands Mary. It portrays her most sympathetically."

For all that, Mary's rigid adherence to the Edwardian code of ethics created a barrier between her and her independent-minded son, Johnnie. "She loved him as fully as she could," Richardson reflects. "She knew that he was a free spirit who was able to be himself. Mary could never be herself because she was always so serious, dedicated, dutiful and aware of her destiny."

“But in the end, Mary’s relationship with Johnnie was constrained by the prevailing circumstances. At that time, doctors were viewed as gods, and when they said Johnnie had to be shut away, Mary felt she simply had to obey their orders.”

That did not prevent her from enjoying moments of tenderness with him, though. “Even though Mary’s relationship with all her children was distant and often conducted through the staff, she did make an effort to spend time with them,” continues the actress. “She set aside an hour each evening when she would gather them in her study and read to them. Later in life, she remembered those occasions very fondly.”

In *The Lost Prince*, the gradual realisation that times are changing has a powerful effect on Mary. The onset of the First World War marks the death of the Edwardian era and its strict devotion to duty. It ushers in a new, more egalitarian age and Mary finds that hard to come to terms with.

“The script shows how rapidly everything is being transformed,” explains Richardson. “It allows you into Mary’s thoughts and emphasises how profoundly affected she is by the change in people’s attitudes towards the Royal Family. She is shocked by the negative reaction to her when she visits a hospital during the war. She regards it as her duty, but people are not particularly happy to see her. She has to take on board the fact that the monarchy might not be as popular as it once was.

“She also tries to hang on to the past by going round other people’s houses avariciously collecting things. She’s obsessed with holding on to things as they are. I can sympathise with that. In the end, however, all this combined with the loss of Johnnie just brings home to Mary how much everything is changing.”

Richardson laughs that this is not the first regal character she has portrayed. “I’ve played a lot of queens in my time. They’re probably all bonkers, but there is no other common link. They’re all totally different characters.”

The actress clearly loved playing Queen Mary, and heaps praise on writer-director Stephen Poliakoff. “I love his dramas because they always contain so much subtext. He allows the back-story to come

through, and as an actor you can really inhabit his world. His dialogue is a lot more complex and wide-ranging than most of the stuff you get sent in the post. Stephen’s work has breadth and depth. He’s an absolute one-off.”

Gina McKee



Gina McKee plays Lalla, Johnnie's devoted nanny. Utterly committed to her charge, she never leaves his side and ensures that his family cannot ignore him. The actress, who has carved out a hugely successful career with roles in television dramas such as *Our Friends In The North*, *The Forsyte Saga* and such films as *Wonderland*, *Notting Hill*, *Croupier* and *The Passion*, says she was inspired by Lalla's sheer dedication.

"When Johnnie died, Queen Mary wrote that Lalla was inconsolable," McKee recalls. "Lalla lived into her nineties and she always kept an enlarged photo of Johnnie. Her devotion to her job was absolutely selfless. She had no hidden agenda; she just wanted to care for Johnnie, particularly when he was put in isolation at Sandringham."

The actress emphasises that Lalla enjoyed a strong relationship with Johnnie's mother, Queen Mary. Nevertheless, the nanny would be prepared to breach the conventions of the time if she felt it would benefit him.

According to McKee, "Lalla was an excellent servant and understood the etiquette of the time incredibly well. However, she was not afraid to challenge the status quo if she thought it would serve her ultimate goal, which was helping Johnnie. "She was incredibly determined, very strong-willed and had a good sense of humour. All those elements of her character helped her to look after him. Why did she do what she did? The answer might be simply that she just wanted him to be heard.

"The way Johnnie communicated was by no means conventional, but Lalla knew that just because he behaved differently didn't mean he should be dismissed out of hand. It's as if she was saying, 'I can see what he can achieve and I know he'll make his mark; it's just that he's not going to achieve it in a conventional fashion.'"

Lalla's tenacious sense of self-discipline is seen in the fact that she learnt to read and write. "I think she used the royal tutors teaching Johnny to educate herself as well," continues McKee. "That links in with her fierce determination which was always employed for the good of others."

What drew the actress to *The Lost Prince* was not just Lalla's strength of character, but also the prospect of working with Stephen Poliakoff, a director she has always admired. "He is a brilliant writer and filmmaker with a very definite vision," she says.

The actress, a thoughtful and intelligent woman who is currently shooting the second series of *The Forsyte Saga*, goes on to laud Poliakoff's script for *The Lost Prince*. "As with all good writing, this screenplay can be interpreted in so many different ways. Stephen is saying, 'Here is my vision of the Royal Family at that time, make your own judgements about it.' He has managed to portray the complexity of the royal household through living, breathing, three-dimensional characters. That's what makes it such a superior drama."

McKee concludes by underlining the sheer dramatic power of *The Lost Prince*. She trusts that viewers will find it a similarly potent experience. "If audiences get the elements that I got when I first read the script, then they'll be informed, entertained and, above all, moved."

Tom Hollander



Tom Hollander takes the role of King George V, the deeply conflicted soul who is Johnnie's father. The actor was intrigued by writer-director Stephen Poliakoff's sympathetic take on this unhappy monarch. "Stephen's vision and insight are wonderful," Hollander declares. "George V has always been viewed by historians as a disciplinarian ogre, but Stephen has painted quite a different picture. He wrote George as someone who is limited, but good. In this, he is a domestic, almost suburban man who just happens to be King. George is depicted here as a person who feels that being King is an onerous task and that it is beyond him to play the role of the grand monarch."

"George is fighting feelings of great inferiority, and so he thinks he has to cling on to the concepts of discipline and order."

This gave Hollander the key to his character. "I played George as a gruff, Colonel Blimp type, a typical Victorian father obsessed with the Navy,

stamp-collecting and time-keeping," he reveals. "He is also wily when Europe's monarchies start crumbling, he realises that he cannot allow his cousin, Tsar Nicholas II, to come over from Russia and that the family should change their name from Saxe-Coburg to the more English-sounding 'Windsor'."

"But at the same time, I wanted to show that George is in fact quite vulnerable. So I portrayed someone whose wife is stronger than he is and who barks because he is actually very nervous."

This vulnerability is mirrored in George's uneasy relationship with his son, Prince John. "He is a man hidebound by class and an inability to communicate with his kids," continues Hollander.

"He is not unloving towards them, he's just clumsy. He tries to play with Johnnie on one occasion but inevitably it goes wrong. George wants to do the right thing by his son but doesn't know how to. In those days, sadly, you dealt with that sort of thing by hiding the child away. King George and Queen Mary were not modern parents – they hadn't read Dr Spock or Miriam Stoppard!"

The actor, who is soon to be seen as Guy Burgess in BBC Two's forthcoming drama, *Cambridge Spies*, pays tribute to Poliakoff. "He never underestimates the intelligence of his viewers and pursues such original themes. I was thrilled to be playing opposite such luminaries as Michael Gambon, Miranda Richardson and Gina McKee."

All in all, Hollander found himself deeply touched by the vision of the Royal Family that Poliakoff has conjured up. "What's fascinating about *The Lost Prince*," he observes, "is the way you see that period through the filter of a child. Through young Johnnie's eyes, you get glimpses of the Edwardian period falling apart. In the end, I found the film very moving. You can't help but feel compassion for these people."

Hollander has made his name with impressive roles in such diverse films as *The Lawless Heart*; *Gosford Park*; *Martha*, *Meet Frank*, *Daniel And Lawrence*; and television dramas *Wives And Daughters*; *Absolutely Fabulous*; and *The Clandestine Marriage*. Hollander was acclaimed for his role opposite Liam Neeson on Broadway, where he played Oscar Wilde's lover in *The Judas Kiss*.

Michael Gambon



Michael Gambon plays Edward VII, Prince John's grandfather. He is a bluff, plain-speaking cove, with an unmistakable affection for the grandson who will often blurt out home truths others are too genteel to articulate.

The splendidly wry actor, who has starred in such memorable television dramas as *Perfect Strangers*, *The Singing Detective*, *Wives And Daughters*, *Longitude*, and films *The Cook*, *The Thief*, *His Wife And Her Lover*, *Dancing At Lughnasa* and *The Insider*, found that he very much warmed to his character in *The Lost Prince*.

"Although he has lived to excess and is starting to go off the rails now, the King is a fundamentally decent man and that shows particularly in his sympathy for Johnnie," reckons Gambon, who has recently been winning rave reviews for his performance in the Caryl Churchill play, *A Number*, at the Royal Court Theatre in London. "He's one of the few people in the royal household who understands the boy because he is childlike himself. Edward loves playing with toy soldiers and has much more in common with children than adults.

"The key thing is that he treats Johnnie like a real person rather than an outcast. While others try to exclude the boy, the King makes a great effort to include him in family activities. I think their relationship is sweet."

Gambon, who won critical praise and awards for his last work with Stephen Poliakoff on *Perfect Strangers*, relished the chance to collaborate with

the writer-director once again. "It's always so stimulating working with Stephen," beams the man widely regarded as one of the greatest actors of his generation. "What I love about him is that he doesn't stand for muddled thinking. He's absolutely lucid in everything he says and does.

"That makes him a terrific director; he has such a clear vision. You're never confused with Stephen directing because he's so eloquent about what he wants," says Gambon, whose forthcoming movies include *Open Range*, a Western directed by Kevin Costner, and *The Actors*, in which he stars as "an Irish idiot in a toupee" opposite Michael Caine.

In addition, Gambon is full of praise for Poliakoff's writing. "He's a marvellous writer. He tells a bloody good story, that's his secret. His dramas grip you from the off and don't let go. Also, they're always intelligent – he's not interested in trivial subjects, he only ever tackles really weighty ones. I'm always trying to pressurise him into writing something else for me. I need the money!"

Gambon has won three consecutive Best Actor Bafta Awards for *Wives And Daughters*, *Longitude* and *Perfect Strangers*, and is rightly proud of them. "What is marvellous is that they were all such different parts," he enthuses. "It's great to have that variety in your career. I'd hate to be in a sitcom or a soap. I'd go mad and start mucking around after a week and they'd sack me. The only way to stop getting bored is to work with people of the calibre of Stephen Poliakoff. That's the most wonderfully rewarding experience."

Matthew Thomas



It is just as well that 14-year-old Matthew Thomas, who plays Prince John from the ages of nine to 14, thoroughly enjoys the competition of going up for auditions, as some 600 boys auditioned for the part.

This is the biggest role yet for Matthew, whose television debut was as a lad from the opposite end of the social spectrum, Carl, an out-of-control vandal in *The Bill*. His most recent film roles were Simon in *Billy Elliot* and *About A Boy*.

“This is the biggest and most challenging role I’ve ever had the opportunity to play,” avers Matthew, who even as a nine-year-old wasn’t fazed when he played Kipper in *Oliver* in front of an audience of 2,000 at The London Palladium.

But taking on the responsibilities of playing the young prince, who was a diagnosed epileptic and possibly suffered from autistic-like learning disabilities, was “scary”, says Matthew.

He explains the research process: “The production arranged for various specialist doctors to come and show us videos and discuss epilepsy. I found this really interesting and I gained a sense of how intense and varied these convulsive attacks can be. I was really sad after speaking to a girl about my age who described how her seizures sort of freeze her mind, then her muscles go into spasm and she shakes uncontrollably – it’s as if fireworks explode in her brain.

“In Johnnie’s case, his fits get worse as he gets older – until he dies tragically at 14, my own age now.

“Stephen was really clear about how I should play Johnnie and always emphasised to me that while the young Prince was different and had difficulties he was intelligent and special. My challenge was to show his intelligence but not by necessarily using the ‘right’ words or actions in a particular situation.”

Matthew adds, “One of my friend’s brothers is autistic and because I’ve known the family all my life I hope I can show some understanding about the condition and hopefully portray it in a sensitive way.”

For Matthew, one word sums up the experience of playing Prince John: it was, quite simply, “brilliant”. He currently attends The Sylvia Young Theatre School, in North London.

Bibi Andersson



Bibi Andersson plays Alexandra of Denmark, the sprightly, spirited queen to King Edward VII (Michael Gambon). The moment she read Stephen Poliakoff's script for *The Lost Prince*, the actress was really keen to take on the role.

"It's a story that immediately caught my eye," she confirms. "More than a pure piece of British history – which I don't know much about – it is a marvellous human drama. It's such a touching tale about this young boy. At the time, the Royal Family tried to hide him away because they thought he was an idiot, but of course he was very far from that. He was the most wonderfully sensitive young man."

Andersson explains that there is a bond between the Queen and her young, much-misunderstood grandson, Johnnie. "She understands him better than anyone else in the family. They both are

childish and that's why they have such a strong connection. He says out loud things that she would never dare say but she secretly applauds him for it."

The actress also admires the stoical way in which Alexandra coped with a difficult marriage. "She has been betrayed a lot by her husband," Andersson says, "but she refuses to let any misery show. She keeps a stiff upper lip because she doesn't want anyone to know that she is leading a humiliating life. To try to forget, she throws herself into collecting little agate animals."

Andersson has had an outstanding career, starring in many of Ingmar Bergman's finest movies: *Smiles Of A Summer Night*, *The Seventh Seal*, *So Close To Life*, *Wild Strawberries*, *The Face*, *The Devil's Eye*, *Now About These Women*, *Persona*, *A Passion*, *The Touch* and *Scenes From A Marriage*. She also had leading roles in such memorable pictures as *Duel At Diablo*, *An Enemy Of The People*, *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* and *Babette's Feast*.

But Andersson is eternally modest and refuses to pick out highlights. "I hate to select just one piece of work. I've done lots of good stuff in the theatre but no one remembers that! I'd rather leave the past in the past and concentrate on the future."

John Sessions



John Sessions takes the role of Mr Hansell, Johnnie's personal tutor. Cooped up with his pupil in a remote cottage on the Sandringham Estate, the teacher becomes increasingly frustrated by the sense of confinement and isolation.

The Scottish actor, who has had standout roles in such diverse productions as *Stella Street*, *Tom Jones*, *Dalziel And Pascoe* and *Gormenghast*, found the character fascinating.

"He's horribly like me," Sessions says with a rich, throaty laugh. "Hansell is a pitiful figure. He's a very dull, Victorian man. He's a distinguished academic who finds himself being a tutor to this prince in a very strange setting.

"He is a Pooterish man. All he can do is disseminate information in the most unimaginative way. He is a standard-issue fact-server-upper. If the wee boy is thinking laterally, like when he draws this amazing family tree, it merely leaves Hansell with this Soames Forsythe-esque sense of bewilderment."

Sessions, who is currently filming both a feature-length version of his hilarious "celebrity impressions soap", *Stella Street*, and *The Key*, a major new BBC Two drama about the decline of the Scottish shipyards, continues by underlining Hansell's sense of imprisonment.

"Of course, he's as much in jail as Johnnie. He's a teacher who is locked into this lonely world. Like Mrs Fairfax, he's very much a prisoner. He's a

stickler who is imprisoned by his rigid mindset as much as being stuck in a far-away cottage. I try to show that by putting a bit of pain in his eyes.

"In the end, Hansell runs away to fight in the First World War not so much out of patriotism but as a means of escape. His only way out is the Western Front. That shows how hard his life as Johnnie's teacher is."

Sessions contrasts the teacher with his pupil. "The King and Queen and Hansell are all roped in and tied by convention, but Johnnie seems freer because he responds so spontaneously to life."

So what else attracted Sessions to *The Lost Prince*? "Two words: Stephen Poliakoff," the actor says with a smile. "When I heard I'd got this part, it was like a bolt from the blue. I'd do anything to work with Stephen. It's just such a strong script. Martin Amis once wrote a work called *The War Against Cliché* and Stephen is fighting that war all the time.

"When describing his work, I find myself using phrases like 'poetic drama.' That may sound airy-fairy, but what it means is that Stephen has a stunning vision. His interpretation of this story is so acute. He comes at everything from an unusual emotional angle. *The Lost Prince* is not a reworking of *Upstairs, Downstairs*; you don't feel, 'Oh no, here we go again, another bland Victorian costume drama'. He stands out as a filmmaker because he's not looking for physical authenticity, but authenticity of behaviour."

Bill Nighy



Bill Nighy plays Stamfordham, the King's brilliantly adept Private Secretary, a man who proves a rock for George V as the monarchy is shaken by cataclysmic change. The actor, who has enjoyed starring roles in such high-class work as *Lawless Heart* (which also stars Tom Hollander), *Still Crazy*, *The Men's Room*, *Alive And Kicking* and the BBC's hugely popular recent series of *AufWiedersehen*, *Pet*, was bowled over when he first read the part.

He was instantly drawn to the character of Stamfordham. "I'd describe him as an exemplary man," Nighy reflects. "First recruited by Queen Victoria, he segued seamlessly into the role of personal Private Secretary to George V. In George's own words, he was 'the man who taught me to be King.'"

The character has an exquisite sense of refinement and good taste. "He was an educated man in a way that George never was," the actor says. "He had access to lots of historical precedents which taught him everything about protocol. He knew exactly how to behave in the presence of every different class."

Stamfordham was also adroit at shielding the King from harsh political forces. "He was able to protect George from too much contact with his not altogether supportive government. He could also translate the monarch's wishes into diplomatic

terms and convey them to the Prime Minister. He proved a vital conduit between the King and the outside world. Everything went through him. He was unquestioningly loyal. You could call Stamfordham the ultimate professional."

Nighy, who is currently shooting *State Of Play*, Paul Abbott's conspiracy thriller for BBC One, and *Love Actually*, the new Richard Curtis feature film, was also attracted to *The Lost Prince* by the idea of collaborating with writer-director Stephen Poliakoff. "I'm a long-time admirer of his work," the actor enthuses. "I love the powerful take he has on the world. The moment I read this script, I was thrilled. There is such enormous ambition to it and you don't see enough of that these days."

He found the screenplay genuinely illuminating. "There was a great deal in it that I didn't know," Nighy admits. "Lots of things surprised me – like how the First World War actually started. I'm very interested in the accidental nature of history. We imagine that history is the result of careful planning, but often it turns on purely random events. This drama bears that out completely."

The actor says that Poliakoff is "fiercely intelligent. And he has this wonderful passion and curiosity about everything he writes." Nighy emphasises that *The Lost Prince* is not just another standard-issue costume drama. "This is not a conventional period piece," he declares. "It features the most significant events in our recent history, but that's not the point. Stephen has a talent for making any story authentic and universal. This resonates beyond the historical context, so that we as modern-day viewers can identify with the characters and understand our history better."

Nighy pays tribute to Poliakoff's originality. "There are absolutely no clichés in Stephen's work. You'd expect a historical drama to be full of hackneyed ideas, but this is a really fresh view of the past. Stephen sees the world in a very compassionate and unique way. This may sound like a speech to Bafta, but suffice it to say that Stephen really is in a class of his own!"

Frank Finlay



Bouquet Of Barbed Wire, Casanova, Don Quixote, Hitler and, most recently, *The Sins*.

“Asquith was a very intelligent man, born and bred in Yorkshire,” the actor muses. “His father was a wool merchant who died when Asquith was eight years old. The boy turned out to be extremely bright and won a scholarship to Oxford. He was a very successful lawyer before he became a politician. He was also very honourable. He turned down a lot of lucrative work as a QC in order to become Prime Minister.”

Even so, Asquith did not enjoy an entirely happy relationship with the Royal Family. “He didn’t approve of the way the King and Queen lived in a little cottage at Sandringham,” the actor says. “All in all, he was an intriguing man, but we only get a glimpse of him here. Maybe Stephen’s next project will be a drama about Asquith!”

But for all the political machinations that are going on in the background, *The Lost Prince* is first and foremost a story about a boy growing up in testing circumstances and that’s what Finlay loves about it. “Stephen is more interested in the human story than the politics,” he observes. “The core of the story is the deeply affecting love between a nanny and a young boy.”

Frank Finlay plays Asquith, the astute Prime Minister with a rather condescending attitude towards the Royal Family. The actor was bowled over when he first read Stephen Poliakoff’s screenplay.

“I thought it was a beautiful, wonderfully written story. It is very moving, but at the same time very educational. It’s told from a sympathetic viewpoint. It shows that the Royal Family are a family who have problems like anyone else. Viewers will be able to relate to that.”

Finlay is known for starring roles in such memorable films as *Othello*, *Cromwell*, *The Molly Maguires* and, most recently, Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist*. On the small screen, his credits include

Ron Cook



Ron Cook takes the role of Lloyd George, the politician who mingled with the Royal Family without ever fully letting them in on government secrets.

The character captivated the actor, who has starred in many high-class productions, ranging from *Secrets And Lies* to *Topsy-Turvy* and *Fields Of Gold* to *Tom Jones*. “To be honest, I didn’t know that much about Lloyd George beforehand, but as soon as I started reading Stephen’s script, I found him fascinating.

“He was so dynamic, he had tremendous energy and extraordinary vision. He introduced the great Budget of 1909 and was the founder of the welfare state. He brought in pensions and National Insurance. He was a large character in every sense.”

All the same, Lloyd George was a driven man. “He was very ambitious, his main aim was to get on in his career and he’d sacrifice anything for that. He was very opportunistic, but the issues he pursued worked.”

In addition, he was a fine war leader. “He came into his own during the war,” Cook says, “he was the

Churchill of the First World War. Some people didn’t trust him, but he was inspirational and had to bring in extraordinary measures to get the country through the war.”

Lloyd George had little time for the Royal Family, however. “He hated the ‘peacock-ism’ of the monarchy,” Cook reflects. “He found George V a very dull person and thought the Royal Family very ordinary. He was famous for his attacks on the landed classes, and the Royal Family were very much afraid of him.”

The Lost Prince works so well as a drama, Cook reckons, because these great events are seen through the prism of Johnnie. “Lloyd George emerges very clearly here because we see him through the eyes of the young Prince. We see his famous philandering side, but also a man of enormous power and energy who has a huge appetite for life. While others sink, Lloyd George is out there battling. I have great admiration for him.”