



The Other Boleyn Girl

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The Other Boleyn Girl

Natascha McElhone, Jodhi May, Jared Harris and Steven Mackintosh star in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, a tale of sex and royal intrigue for BBC Two. The film reveals the little-known story of Mary Boleyn, who was mistress to King Henry VIII before he married her sister, Anne.

Inspired by Philippa Gregory's best-selling novel of the same name and loosely based on fact, *The Other Boleyn Girl* is devised and directed by Philippa Lowthorpe (following a process of improvisation) and produced by Ruth Caleb.

The film tells how the happily married Mary (McElhone) is forced by her family to become Henry VIII's mistress after catching his eye at Court. Initially horrified by her predicament, she quickly falls in love with the young King (Harris) but, whilst she is pregnant and in confinement, the King's wandering eye turns to her ruthless, ambitious sister (May), and their scheming relations – including her brother George (Mackintosh) – make her step aside so Anne (May) can manoeuvre herself into becoming Queen.

Natascha McElhone has starred in Hollywood hits such as *The Truman Show* and *The Devil's Own* and stars opposite George Clooney in Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris*, which is currently on release. Jodhi May was seen most recently in *Tipping The Velvet* and *Daniel Deronda*; Jared Harris's credits include the films *Lush*, *Happiness* and *I Shot Andy Warhol* and Steven Mackintosh (George) won an RTS award for his part in *Care* and has appeared in the BBC's award-winning *Our Mutual Friend* and *Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels*. Other cast members include Philip Glenister, Jack Shepherd, John Woodvine and Ron Cook.

Award-winning producer Ruth Caleb says: "*The Other Boleyn Girl* tries to get behind historical events and the politics of history to explore the emotional lives of those involved. It's a story of love, loss and passion; about women and ambition and how the two sisters deal with power. The great families of the time used their daughters as pawns to gain favours from the King and the Boleyn family were anxious to thrust their girls into his orbit."



The cast spent four weeks in workshops improvising the script together with director Philippa Lowthorpe. Andrew Davies was script consultant and Gregory acted as historical script consultant. The executive producers are David Thompson and Alex Holmes, and filming took place at Berkeley Castle near Bristol.

The Other Boleyn Girl is the first full-length film directed by Philippa Lowthorpe, an award-winning documentary-maker (*Three Salons At The Seaside*, *A Childhood*, *A Skirt Through History*). She says: "We are doing history in a completely different way. The improvisation process should bring a freshness and modernity to the production, as each actor is able to interpret their own role rather than the script presenting one writer's view of history."



Introduction

David Thompson, Head of BBC Films, says: “ We have been concentrating on finding new ways to approach drama, working with documentary makers moving into drama. This is a joint initiative between the BBC’s drama and factual departments.”

The production is the latest in a series of acclaimed films from BBC Films created through improvisation and produced by Ruth Caleb. These include *Out Of Control*, shown recently on BBC One, which won the Michael Powell Award for Best British Film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival; *Tomorrow, La Scala!* which debuted at the Cannes Film Festival and was shown on BBC Two last autumn; *When I Was 12*; and *Last Resort*.

Caleb is also producing the improvised drama *Rehab*, directed by Antonia Bird and scripted by Rona Munro, which will also be seen shortly on BBC Two. Her other recent credits include *Care*, which won the Prix Italia for Best Drama (singles) as well as the BAFTA Award for Best Single Drama. At the same awards, Caleb received the Alan Clarke Award for Creative Contribution to Television.

The Other Boleyn Girl is a BBC Films production for BBC TWO.

Production notes

Novelist Philippa Gregory stumbled across the story of Mary while she was doing some research into the Tudor navy and read about a ship Henry VIII had launched called the *Mary Boleyn*. “I thought, that’s odd, surely it should be Anne.” Further investigation revealed that Mary appeared as a footnote in most major serious history books of the period. “Nobody has really bothered very much with Mary Boleyn, as she was just one of a number of the King’s lovers – but I thought it was a fantastic story, very provocative.”

Gregory says it is impossible to say whether Mary Boleyn actually had a child by Henry but she did have two children, Henry and Catherine, during the time she was his lover and she believes they were likely to be Henry’s. On the occasion of both their births, Henry gave Mary’s husband land and money. “I don’t see why he would if they were just ordinary kids. I think Henry knew or suspected that they were his, but they never made any claim on the throne and Mary’s husband, (William Carey), gave them his name. They rose into quite high positions of power and authority once Elizabeth came to the throne.

“The truth of the matter is that women were used as bargaining counters in the game of power and making your family more wealthy,” continues Gregory. “The power play between the prominent families at the time is terribly important. Because all power is concentrated in the hands of one man – and because he is fundamentally free to do whatever he likes – it’s a recipe for tyranny. Everyone in the court has to focus on what he would like.”

In the film, George Boleyn agrees to sleep with his sister Anne in a desperate attempt to give her a male heir and save both her, and himself, from the executioner. Gregory says the claim that George slept with Anne is “speculative history”. “It’s not a modern suggestion, but whether they did or not none of us will ever know.” Anne was tried for incest with George and found guilty. George for his part faced the same charges and his own wife gave evidence against him. Gregory herself believes that it is unlikely Anne committed adultery with anybody.

“The risks are so great and the benefits are so doubtful. However, she took it into her head that she couldn’t get a son from the King and she was right to think that if she couldn’t give him a son she wouldn’t last very long. You could argue that it would have been quite a sensible thing to do if she could get away with it. And if she could get away with it, the most likely person would have been her brother as he had exactly the same family interests as her.”

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Cast

Natasha McElhone Mary Boleyn
Jodhi May Anne Boleyn
Jared Harris King Henry
Steven Mackintosh George Boleyn
Philip Glenister William Stafford
Jack Shepherd Thomas Boleyn
John Woodvine Howard Boleyn
Anthony Howell William Carey
Ron Cook Thomas Cromwell

Production credits

Director Philippa Lowthorpe
Producer Ruth Caleb
Executive Producers David Thompson
Alex Holmes
Development Producer Luke Alkin

Script Editor Mona Qureshi
Script Consultant Andrew Davies
Historical Script Consultant Philippa Gregory
Director of Photography Graham Smith
Production Designer Tom Bowyer
Editor Jonathan Morris
Composer Peter Salem
Associate Producer Michas Koc
Casting Director Carrie Hilton
Costume Designer Maggie Chappelhow
Make-up Designer Daniel Phillips

From the novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory

Natascha McElhone
plays Mary Boleyn

Natascha McElhone, who is currently starring opposite George Clooney in Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris*, was fascinated by the story of Anne Boleyn's forgotten sister. "Although Mary was married, when she caught Henry's eye at court her family forced her into having an affair with him," she says. "Though she went to his bedchamber with great reluctance, it wasn't long before she had fallen in love with the King. But when she fell pregnant by him, his attentions turned to her sister Anne and her family made her step aside so that Anne could have a chance at becoming Queen.

"What's interesting about *The Other Boleyn Girl* is the battle between two women, that close, sisterly love-hate relationship, as well as the power play that went on at Court," says McElhone.

She agrees that, from a modern perspective, it seems incredible that Mary allowed herself to be manipulated so harshly by her family. McElhone explains Mary's apparent acceptance of her treatment. "I'm sure she felt deeply frustrated by her predicament, but women just did not exist in their own right at that time, they were property. If you're born and bred with that as your reality I guess there is no other option but to go along with it. That is what is exceptional about Anne – she did try to control her destiny and step outside the parameters of what was acceptable." Mary's own rebellion comes later when she secretly marries someone outside the court, suggests McElhone. "Their journeys were very different, but were both an attempt to escape the restrictions and confinements of their age."

Mary experiences both sides of life in the fickle Tudor Court. She is quickly seduced by the glamour and freedom of being the King's mistress, but soon finds herself cast aside and forced to become an onlooker as her sister manipulates her way to power – and then falls victim to it herself.

So would McElhone have liked to have experienced life in the Tudor Court? "Not for all the tea in China!" she laughs. "We only lived it for a month and it was hell, I would never wish that on anyone,



the fear of not knowing. You were utterly powerless and if something you said was slightly misheard or misconstrued, it could lead to your execution."

McElhone has made herself the envy of women everywhere for her starring role in *Solaris* opposite George Clooney. In fact, a list of her co-stars would make most red-blooded women tremble at the knees – Brad Pitt, Robert De Niro, Harrison Ford, Jim Carrey – but she remains sanguine about her leading men. "I don't think of them in those terms," she says, "I don't stand there and think 'Oh my God, it's so-and-so.' I don't really know why that is and it's quite lucky it doesn't happen to me because otherwise I probably wouldn't be able to get on and do it."

However, she does admit that her time on the set of *Solaris* was made more fun by the antics of her co-star. "He's very funny, he could be a stand-up," she says of Clooney. "As well as acting, his other job on the film was keeping everyone completely entertained. He was also editing and cutting the film he'd just directed, *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*, and preparing for *Intolerable Cruelty*, a Coen Brothers film he was due to start straight afterwards. His energy is amazing, I kept asking him what pills he was on but he wouldn't tell me," she laughs.



Natascha McElhone

McElhone is hot property in Hollywood with two more films due to open shortly. The first is *City Of Ghosts*, which marks Matt Dillon's directorial debut, and the second is *Laurel Canyon*, in which she plays alongside Frances McDormand, Christian Bale and Kate Beckinsale in what she describes as "a very funny, very accessible film about dysfunctional relationships."

However, she has no plans to shift her family across the Atlantic to LA. "It's never crossed my mind to be honest. I'm a Londoner, I love London, my family and friends live close by and Martin (her husband) works in a hospital here. My life is here," she explains simply. "Anyway, I'm so bad at that whole networking thing. I'd probably end up staying in my house, reading or playing with my two-year-old son Theo."

Jodhi May plays Anne Boleyn

Jodhi May, recently seen on screen as Mirah Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* and as Florence Banner in *Tipping The Velvet*, takes on the role of Mary's famous sister Anne. *The Other Boleyn Girl* taught her a lot about the history of the period – she was unaware of Mary Boleyn's existence before she was approached about the film.

"It's always interesting to find, in nooks and crannies, people who were on the periphery of quite major historical events. I thought it was an incredible story. I imagine it was quite normal that a king would have these fairly incestuous relationships with women in court, but it struck me as being a bit like a Greek tragedy.

"It does seem outrageous now, but at the time the whole idea was that your daughters were really the material wealth of your family in the court, to the extent that pimping your daughter off to the king was an extraordinary privilege," she laughs.

But she says the position the sisters find themselves in is instrumental in shaping Anne's actions. "During the film, Anne changes from someone who is very naïve and very young to someone who actually realises that there's only one way forward – and that is to define herself through her relationship with Henry VIII. She watches what



Mary does and learns from her sister's mistakes. She has a strong idea that she is more than just a woman who is going to sleep with the King.

"Anne was Henry's intellectual superior, but even though she was a woman of intelligence, wit and determination she still had to trade on her sexuality to be in a position of power. That sexuality led to her undoing. She couldn't be a politician in her own right because there was no concept of a woman having that kind of autonomy."

Admitting to being terrified at the idea of doing the improvisation and finding herself without anything to say, Jodhi voraciously devoured a whole pile of history books which she says completely changed her opinion of Anne.

"People have this idea of Anne Boleyn as being a real hussy, a morally disreputable woman, because she was executed for vice. But that was just the most expedient means of getting rid of her, and when you see the way Cromwell manipulates the situation afterwards you can only draw the conclusion that she was somebody he had to get out of the way to gain more power."

Jodhi May strayed into acting by accident at the age of 12 when film-makers visited her London school looking for a young girl to play Molly Roth, the daughter of anti-apartheid activist Ruth First, in *A World Apart* (directed by Chris Menges.) "It was only because my parents vaguely knew the Firsts so they felt quite sympathetic to the piece, but had it not been for that there is no way I would ever have been allowed to go anywhere near the film set."

When May's performance in *A World Apart* won her a Best Actress Award at Cannes, she was completely unprepared for the public attention that she was to receive. Her family made sure she kept her feet firmly on the ground and she continued with her education and studied English Literature at Oxford University while continuing to take occasional film roles.

Her list of credits is impressive – *The Last Of The Mohicans*, *Sister My Sister*, *The Woodlanders*, *The*

Gambler, Warriors and *The House Of Mirth* to name but a few. It's fair to say she seems drawn to rather serious, meaty roles. But she shrugs off the suggestion that she is uninterested in lighter parts. "I wouldn't be at all against doing something completely superficial and frivolous, it could be a great challenge," she laughs.

But her latest role, on stage at the National Theatre opposite Ralph Fiennes in *The Talking Cure*, is far from being frivolous and superficial. She plays another character marginalised by history – Sabina, the first patient of Jung, who went on to become his lover and a major figure in psychoanalysis. "Her ideas were not really credited, they were pinched by Jung and Freud who appropriated them for their own ways of thinking."

The play marks the conclusion of a busy year for May, what with *Daniel Deronda*, *Tipping The Velvet* and *The Other Boleyn Girl*, all filmed for the BBC. But for all that, 27-year-old May won't have seen herself on the small screen as she doesn't own a television set. "I was brought up without a television, so living without one is just a habit that I haven't broken. And judging by my reaction when I stay in hotel rooms with a television and end up being glued to it for hours, I don't think it would be very good for me to have one. I'd just stay at home and do nothing else."

Jared Harris
plays Henry VIII



Jared Harris's view of Henry VIII was very simple. "I thought of him as a well-known King with a predilection for knocking off his wives," he chuckles. But once he began digging into the history of the time he was hooked.

"His idea of being a king was to be the centrepiece of the biggest travelling pageant in Europe and to project the glory of England through the glory of his court," explains Harris, son of the late Richard Harris who died shortly after filming of *The Other Boleyn Girl* was finished.

"Henry was completely egocentric and encouraged to be that way," he says, "I don't think he feels badly about how he treats Mary – in fact I don't think Henry gives Mary a second thought once he becomes interested in Anne, she just drops off the radar."

His relationship with Anne was much more intense. "He was a guy involved in one of those lunatic love affairs, Anne is someone he's obsessed with and they have that love-hate relationship going, the whole I-love-you-so-much-I-want-to-kill-you-thing."

Both sisters were thrust into his path by the

Boleyn family who, along with the other major families of the Court, were jostling for power, position and favours from the King, but Harris believes even Henry himself would never have felt secure. "Whilst there was a constant buzz and sense of opportunity at the court, the level of suspicion with which you viewed everyone around you would eventually make you paranoid, it would mess with your head.

"I could see the allure of a life at court, but it's such a dangerous place to be, there must have been a simpler life that would have been more rewarding," says Harris, who isn't even tempted by the appeal of being king. "My nature is corruptible and I would have been corrupted by the power. I wouldn't have withstood it, but I loved doing it for two months."

Jared Harris has been based in New York for over 10 years, but lately he has found himself spending more time in England. After finishing *The Other Boleyn Girl*, he then spent time filming BBC Films' *Ted & Sylvia* starring Gwyneth Paltrow. Now he is off to Los Angeles to begin work on Adam Goldberg's movie about the film business, *I Love Your Work*: "It's all about celebrity, paranoia and stalking," he says.

Both his brothers are in film – Damian is a director and Jamie is an actor – but he says it was far from inevitable that he would follow in his father's footsteps. "I avoided it for the first 18 years of my life," he says. "Then I went to college in America and I was obviously curious because I went and tried it out and I loved it, I just had so much fun."

Despite his success in films, his first love remains the theatre. "Acting in the theatre is more like a sport, you always have the involvement of the audience and it's the audience that makes every performance different. I don't have a favourite role, but I have a favourite night," he says.