

## Rufus Sewell plays King Charles II (King Charles II: b.1630 d.1685)



An hour's drive from the beautiful city of Prague, up a dusty, twisting track, lies the 17th-century castle of Toczniak. Into these ruins part of the set for *Charles II*, BBC One's lavish new drama serial, has been built.

The King himself, played by Rufus Sewell who makes an exciting return to BBC Television eight years after his appearance in *Cold Comfort Farm*, is seemingly unfazed by the sweltering heat as he strides around the hillside ramparts in his blood-red velvet and ermine robes, a jewelled crown and wig of long, dark curls.

Sewell's role as the traumatised, exiled son of Charles I, beheaded under Cromwell's austere regime, meant a welcome return to the Czech Republic for the handsome star. Sewell filmed *A Knight's Tale* in 2001 in Prague.

"I was wearing black metal armour and was sitting on a horse in 110 degrees," he declares. "At least playing Charles I can take the wig off when it gets too hot – that's what they did in those days and that's why their own hair was cut very short."

His close-cropped pate faced an even closer shave when he came to portray the Monarch on his deathbed.

He explains: "He had a stroke and they shaved his head to do a series of grotesque and agonising treatments, so I agreed to have my head shaved completely to play the scene."

In 1660, Charles returned to England to reclaim the throne, entering London on his 30th birthday, 29 May. He would become the last English king ever to try to rule without Parliament. Sewell, 36, hopes his portrayal of the charismatic sovereign, who reigned until 1685, shows the man in all his contradictions.

"Over four hours you have a chance to show a very developed portrait of someone. Charles II was many conflicting things. He was a weak man and he was a strong man; he was sentimental and he was tough; he was good and he was bad; he was quite moral and he was a naughty old bugger," he adds with a grin. "So he was very complicated in the way that normal human beings are. You get a chance to see all of it in this drama, whereas in films often

everything is cut down and people tend to be reduced to their simplest element.

“People know certain things about historical figures,” the actor continues. “And what they know about Charles II is orange-selling Nell Gwynn and spaniels. In fact, we’ve avoided having spaniels coming out of our ears – there’s just the odd one.”

The overwhelming majority of the 17th-century population took the newly restored Stuart King to their hearts.

“The people liked him because he generally had what they call the common touch,” explains Rufus. “I think that’s because, when he was young and in hiding, he spent a lot of time with ordinary people and was forced to depend on them to survive. He had to pose as one of the servants as they travelled around the country trying to escape Cromwell’s soldiers. He would ask people, ‘What do you think of the King?’ It’s an extraordinary thing for a king to do and the amazing thing is he managed not to stick out like a sore thumb.

“I think that experience stayed with him, especially in how he treated Catholics, because he was looked after by Catholics and was very sympathetic to them. He had a good manner with people, he listened – and of course he occasionally shagged them as well!” laughs the green-eyed *Middlemarch* star, who was so memorable as George Eliot’s hero, Will Ladislaw, in the award-winning BBC series.

In a new era of post-Puritan freedom, women made themselves readily available to Charles and, over his lifetime, he fathered at least 13 illegitimate children.

“Well, he was a king,” says an amused Sewell, who is best known for his roles in *Cold Comfort Farm*, *Martha*, *Meet Frank*, *Daniel And Laurence* and *A Knight’s Tale*. “Being king at that time was like being king, prime minister and the most famous film star in the world rolled into one. And if you can’t pull with that combination ...”

The hedonistic Charles never really settled down with one woman but he was a generous lover and remained friends with most of his mistresses.

The actor, who has also starred on the big screen in *Dangerous Beauty*, *Bless The Child* with Kim Basinger and the recent action thriller *Extreme Ops*, hopes viewers will like his character.

“Like any person, if you watch them across their whole life, they do some bad things – they make mistakes. He messes it up a few times, especially with women because he’s useless at standing up to them. All a woman has to do is cry and he goes, ‘Okay, you can have what you like,’ which often proved disastrous and is dangerous in a king. This is particularly true when Barbara Castlemaine [the King’s glamorous, manipulative mistress, played by Helen McCrory] squirts out a few tears; he’s absolutely helpless. People will certainly occasionally think he’s daft but, hopefully, they’ll see he was a good man as well. You see both sides of him.”

Sewell believes that *Charles II* stands out in the period drama genre.

“It is a fantastic story and it is very different because it isn’t one of the great novels but is written from history. It’s about a fantastic, vivid period of time that was very decadent – almost like the Sixties. They drank heavily and there was a sexual revolution. Because the old Puritans had just been booted out, there was an enormous explosion of freedom – artistic freedom, musical freedom and sexual freedom, particularly at Court.

“And through all the great events of the time, like the Plague and the Great Fire of London, you have this man battling to hold on to his crown. Adrian Hodges has drawn an extraordinary portrait of an epoch and of a man.”

Working often 12-hour days and six-day weeks for three months meant that Sewell had very little time to step out of character.

“It’s not that you actually become someone else, but you get comfortable in the skin. And the feeling of being Charles settled on me after the first couple of weeks and it never really went away, and that’s such a luxury. I felt very, very comfortable as Charles and that’s a lot to do with how immersed I was in the part.”



## Cast Interviews

Rufus plays a physical sovereign and viewers will see him fencing his agile way across the small screen. “But I can’t really fence,” he confesses modestly. “It’s the magic of rehearsal and cameras. At drama school I did a little fencing and lots of jobs required it, so I’ve done bits and bobs before but, basically, you learn whatever is necessary for when the cameras are on. But complete the sequence and if someone were to say, ‘All right, carry on,’ you’d be crap!”

Rufus studied at London’s Central School of Speech and Drama, where he won the Best Newcomer Award for his London stage debut in *Making It Better*. He was nominated for an Olivier Award for his role in Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* and won the Broadway Theatre World Award for *Translations*.

He is currently filming *Tristan And Isolde*, directed by Kevin Reynolds, in which he plays Lord Mark, first in the west of Ireland, then ironically back in Prague.

Sewell was born in Twickenham to Welsh mother Jo and Australian animator father Bill, who worked on *Yellow Submarine*. His father died when he was 10 and he has an older brother, Caspar.

If he hadn’t become an actor, he thinks he would have pursued the musical career he began with his brother, playing drums in teen bands, but the magic of film weaved its spell when he was a child.

He recalls: “It wasn’t like a thunderbolt, but I remember being very young and watching Charles Laughton in *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame* and thinking, ‘I could do that’. I remember him in the rafters and seeing the little child inside him, behind his eyes; this little creature stuck in this horrible body. I thought that was interesting, the fact that you could see his soul.

I also remember trying to work out why I liked Anthony Hopkins and Marlon Brando. There was something about them – the fact that you could see something different in their eyes than their face was trying to tell you – that maybe there were two different stories going on, like real people.”

## Rupert Graves plays the Duke of Buckingham (George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham: b.1628 d.1687)



At the age of 16, actor Rupert Graves was clowning around in the sawdust of a travelling circus; now, more than two decades on, he enjoys more serious acclaim as one of Britain's most hard-working and respected actors.

He's about to be seen on the small screen as George Villiers, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham in BBC One's powerful and passionate new drama *Charles II*, about the reign of the man who became known as the "Merry Monarch" for the colour and fun he brought back to England after decades of Puritanical repression.

Buckingham, Charles's oldest and closest friend, is one of the most colourful characters in the Court of King Charles II [played by Rufus Sewell]. His life of debauchery included bedding his own cousin, who was also the Sovereign's seductive mistress, Barbara Villiers [played by Helen McCrory], despite being one of Charles's most trusted inner circle of ministers.

Rupert thought carefully, however, before he slid under the skin of the self-seeking Buckingham. He'd recently brought his dark-eyed charisma to the role of Young Jolyon in John Galsworthy's epic *The Forsyte Saga* and he explains: "After doing *Forsyte*, I didn't know if I wanted to do another big period drama. But when I read Adrian Hodges's scripts for *Charles II*, I thought they were wonderful. I loved the story and the power struggle between Buckingham and Charles."

The future King and the young Buckingham shared the tragedy of the murder of their fathers. The 1st Duke was assassinated and his son was brought up with the Royal children of Charles I. After Charles I was executed by Cromwell, their bond of brotherhood became even stronger. Ultimately, however, Buckingham's loyalty to his friend proved to be frail. After a decade in exile with Charles, George returned to England to marry the daughter of the Parliamentarian Fairfax and to make peace with Cromwell's Government.



Despite Buckingham's abandonment of the King, he was fond of Charles. "Their fathers were actually lovers," he reveals. "They were brought up almost as brothers and they were in exile together. I think it all went a bit belly up for Buckingham when Charles became King. He was jealous – I think he was motivated a lot by jealousy – and thought he could have done an awful lot better."

Graves, who has starred in BBC TV's *Take A Girl Like You* and *The Tenant Of Wildfell Hall*, adds: "Charles forgave Buckingham for abandoning him because there was such love between them. And Charles was, by all accounts, a decent, forgiving man."

Decent, though, is far from how Graves sees his character. "He's a terrible man," he asserts. "He's a monster. He's an ambitious, double-crossing scumbag, really. But he has a lot of flair," he adds with a laugh.

During filming for *Charles II* in Prague, Graves was able to use his fencing skills. "It was good – I like all that stuff."

Charles's huge sexual appetite saw him feasting on a banquet of beautiful women and Rupert, married to Susie and the father of five-month-old Josef born during the *Charles II* shoot, laughs when asked if he thinks there's an age when men should settle down.

"You can't legislate for things like that," he grins. "Do what feels right."

And he doesn't believe he would have liked to live in a different century. "No, I'm quite happy being here," he says firmly.

Graves, whose theatrical pedigree includes starring roles in Sean Mathias's *The Elephant Man*, Patrick Marber's revival of *The Caretaker*, with Michael Gambon, Howard Davies's *The Iceman Cometh*, with Kevin Spacey and Simon Callow's *Les Enfants du Paradis*, isn't sure when he first set his sights on a career in the spotlight, although he recalls being in a school play when he was about four. He still remembers the fascination of his "little green stockings" in his role as an elf.

It's early days, but if his baby son wants to take centre stage when he grows up, Rupert thinks he'll

be content. "I'd like to think that I'd let him do what he wants to do and try and encourage him to do whatever he wants to do. I'll have to wait and see how I feel."

## Martin Freeman plays Lord Shaftesbury (Lord Shaftesbury: b.1621 d.1683)



Martin Freeman is best known as Tim, the voice of reason in the encircling madness of *The Office*, BBC Two's multi-award-winning comedy. So he was delighted when the producer and director of *Charles II* thought of him for the very different role of Lord Shaftesbury, the Republican who became one of Charles's most important ministers but ended up as his fierce opponent.

Sitting in his caravan on the main set of the drama on the outskirts of Prague, Freeman is sporting unfamiliar close-cropped hair – so that the period wig can come on and off in front of the camera. Leaning back on the couch, the actor recalls his joy when he was offered the role of Shaftesbury.

“All in all, it was impossible to say no,” he beams. “This was so different it was a must. It felt like a real change. Not only is it not comedy, but also it's set in the 17th century. I can't be playing a wise-cracking, laid-back 21st-century bloke forever.

“I thought, ‘Before it's too late to demonstrate that I can play something different, I should show that I can’. I became an actor in order to act, rather than to play people who are just a tiny bit different from me for the rest of my life!”

Added to that, Freeman was bowled over by the power and complexity of Adrian Hodges's screenplay. “It was one of the best scripts I had ever read. I was riveted from the moment I picked it up.

“Unlike a lot of TV scripts that you read, the scenes last for more than half a page. With Adrian's writing, you get genuine character development within the scenes themselves. It's not just, ‘Do you want a cuppa?’”

What distinguishes Hodges's script, he says, is its intelligence. “It's really thought-provoking,” says the actor, who has also enjoyed starring roles in BBC



One's *The Debt*, *Ali G In Da House*, *Hardware*, *Margery And Gladys* and *Men Only*. "It doesn't insult the audience. Nor is it just some dry pamphlet."

In Freeman's view, the drama brings to life the political machinations of Charles II's Court. "If you have ever seen Prime Ministers' Questions or thought about the relationship between parliament and the monarchy, then this piece will fascinate you. You don't need to know the minutiae of the historical detail, it draws you in because it's great drama!"

So how would he describe his character?

"Shaftesbury is hyper-intelligent and hyper-critical," the 31-year-old actor reflects. "He has an immense influence within the Privy Council. He is very much in touch with the mood of the people. On many occasions, he uses his instinct to put a brake on the king's plans. 'Parliament will not countenance that' is almost Shaftesbury's catchphrase. He certainly has a razor-sharp mind."

During periods of intense political turmoil, Shaftesbury also knows the value of language – and how to use it as a weapon. He is a Machiavellian operator par excellence.

The actor believes that viewers will respond to *Charles II* because it contains so many contemporary resonances.

"The power struggle within the family will strike a chord," he muses. "There is a bitter sibling rivalry between Charles and James. The other aspect that will ring true with today's audiences is the sexual shenanigans in the drama. It just goes to show that those sort of things have always gone on!"

Freeman is currently in the middle of filming one of the most keenly anticipated programmes of the decade, the Christmas special of *The Office*. Just why has the sitcom become such a huge hit? In Freeman's eyes, "what really resonates about the show is not that we've nailed what it's like to be in an office, but that we've nailed what it's like for people having to work with each other anywhere. It shows the crushes and the frustrations and the unfulfilled ambitions that happen in all jobs. It's not Dostoevsky, but it's true."

The show's co-writers and directors, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, have announced that the two-part Christmas special will be the last-ever episode of *The Office*. The decision will disappoint the sitcom's millions of fans, but Freeman thinks it is wise to go out at the top.

"*The Office* has been the biggest comedy hit for a long, long time, and there must be massive pressure on Ricky and Steve to make 400 more episodes, but I trust them to resist that pressure at all costs. Frankly, it's the right decision." And it will also free up Freeman to take on more roles like Shaftesbury.

**Ian McDiarmid plays  
Sir Edward Hyde**  
(Sir Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon: b.1609 d.1674)



Ian McDiarmid's theatrical pedigree has carved his reputation as one of our most respected actors and directors – yet he's equally at ease as the evil Emperor Palpatine in George Lucas's *Star Wars* spectacles.

Today, the award-winning star is sitting in his trailer in a wooded clearing on the outskirts of Prague, waiting to don the costume and silver wig that will transform him into 17th-century Royalist statesman Sir Edward Hyde, the Lord Chancellor.

"Charles I asked Sir Edward Hyde to teach his son how to be a king. He becomes Charles II's advisor and, after the Execution, a father figure, and he more or less arranged the politics of the Restoration.

"When Charles is well established as King, he tries to put his genuine feelings about religious toleration into practice. Hyde warns him that it's too early, but he won't listen. Hyde doesn't succeed in getting him what he wants as far as Parliament is concerned, so he has to go.

"Fortunately," says McDiarmid drily, "he leaves with his head intact, but is exiled to France."

He muses: "It's interesting now that the office of Lord Chancellor is going to be abolished. I wonder what Edward Hyde, Lord Clarendon, would have felt if he'd known his office was going to disappear. He would probably be amazed that it had lasted so long."

McDiarmid, who starred in *Gorky Park* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, believes Hyde was motivated by both loyalty to Charles I and a sense of good government. "He's sometimes a little bit arrogant and pompous, but that was very much as a means to an end. He was also very well set up. He had a very expensive house in Piccadilly, which was subsequently burnt by 'the mob', and to his astonishment he indirectly provided not one, but two heirs to the throne in his two granddaughters.

Hyde's daughter, Anne, married James, Duke of York, Charles's younger brother and later James II. Their two daughters, Mary and Anne, would one day reign as queens.



## Cast Interviews

*Charles II*, flamboyant and passionate, opens a window on to a bygone world for viewers, recreating not only the Great Plague and Great Fire of London, but also providing a glimpse of the Royal romps enjoyed in the aftermath of Puritan repression.

McDiarmid believes that the audience's appetite for history is partly a result of uncertainty. "Maybe in times that are uncertain, politically and spiritually, people tend to look back. This is fascinating because of what's happening now with the Commons and the Lords and the shifting nature of Parliament, and what was fundamentally happening then. Charles's reign marked the beginning of the loss of the Monarchy's power and the corresponding increase of the democratic power of Parliament – what we have now."

McDiarmid was on a plane to Sydney as soon as he had finished filming *Charles II* to start work on *Star Wars*.

"It's the last one coming up: episode three, film number six," he declares.