

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2022/23 SEASON**



**THE DUKE**

(Language: English)

Director: Roger Michell, 2022. Running time: 96 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2022.

“As with so many of cinema’s most successful practitioners, the South Africa-born British film-maker Roger Michell, who died last September aged 65, was not an “auteur” with a singular distinctive style. On the contrary, he was a versatile craftsman who could turn his hand to a range of genres with ease. From the classic Richard Curtis romcom *Notting Hill* to the American thriller *Changing Lanes* and the deliciously twisty Daphne du Maurier dark romance *My Cousin Rachel*, Michell instinctively understood the differing demands of each story he was telling. He adapted Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* for TV with great success, gave Anne Reid her finest role in the taboo-breaking, Kureishi-scripted drama *The Mother*, and directed a sorely underrated screen adaptation of Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love*, the bravura opening movement of which has haunted me for years.

Michell’s documentary about the Queen, *Elizabeth: A Portrait in Parts*, comes to cinemas and streaming in June. Meanwhile, his last dramatic feature film, *The Duke*, is finally getting a belated cinema release following Covid-related delays. It’s an extremely likable crime-caper comedy that owes a tonal debt to such Charles Crichton classics as *Hue and Cry* and *The Lavender Hill Mob* – good-natured British romps that helped to turn Ealing Studios into one of the nation’s most revered institutions. The fact that *The Duke* is based on a true story just accentuates its sense of homegrown eccentricity.

Jim Broadbent, who cut an impressively tragicomic figure in Michell’s bittersweet old-age/New Wave charmer *Le Week-end* (2013), plays Kempton Bunton, a real-life figure who achieved notoriety in the mid-60s after the theft of Goya’s portrait of the Duke of Wellington from the National Gallery. We meet Bunton in the dock in London, pleading not guilty to pilfering said painting, of which he was never a fan (“It’s not very good, is it?”). From here we spiral back to Newcastle in the spring of 1961, where the retired bus driver and self-proclaimed Robin Hood figure has felt the long arm of the law for refusing to pay his TV licence fee. Outraged that public money is being spent to keep a “half-baked portrait by some Spanish drunk” in the UK, habitual soap-

boxer Bunton declares that the money would be better spent on “war widows and pensioners... for the greater good of mankind”.

When the Goya goes awol, the authorities suspect highly organised international criminals, probably including “a trained commando” (the 1962 Bond film *Dr No* fancifully placed the painting in its villain’s lair). But when Kempton’s long-suffering wife, Dorothy (Helen Mirren), finds “a stolen masterpiece in me wardrobe!”, it appears that her husband has outdone himself in his quest to battle social injustice at large while driving his nearest and dearest to distraction at home.

Bunton’s stranger-than-fiction story has been dramatised before, most notably in David Spicer’s 2015 BBC radio play *Kempton and the Duke*. The well-crafted script for Michell’s film is co-written by Richard Bean and Clive Coleman, the latter of whom served as legal correspondent for the BBC. All of which makes it doubly ironic that a central theme of *The Duke* is Bunton’s staunch BBC refusenik status and his campaign against the licence fee for pensioners, something that has become all the more timely since the film premiered at Venice in September 2020. In last week’s *Observer*, Broadbent noted that “now Kempton would be defending the BBC to the hilt against these wicked people trying to dismantle it by foul means. He’d have switched sides.”

As for *The Duke*, it’s jovially neutral fare, preferring to frame its story as an unashamedly old-fashioned underdog tale – an absurdist struggle of the little man against monolithic bureaucracy. Broadbent is terrific in the lead, investing his bumbling antihero with a winning blend of fearlessness and foolishness even as the film tips from social satire into theatrical silliness. Plaudits to Mirren, too, for turning exasperation into an art form, ensuring that while *The Duke* is never quite as surprising as the case that inspired it, it nonetheless retains a much-needed astringent streak.”

Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2022.

“For what has become his final feature film, director Roger Michell made this sweet-natured and genial comedy in the spirit of *Ealing*, which bobs up like a ping pong ball on a water-fountain... The mystery of [the portrait’s] disappearance had so electrified the media that there was even a gag about it in the James Bond film *Dr No*, using a copy personally painted by the legendary production designer Ken Adam, which was itself stolen. Maybe there should be a film about that as well.

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The court heard this was Bunton's protest at government misuse of taxpayers' money (the painting had been saved for the nation at some cost) and to publicise his demand for pensioners to be given free TV licences. (This film features the usual "historical coda" sentences over the closing credits, and one sentimentally records that free TV licences for the over-75s were finally introduced in 2000. But no mention of these being taken away again in 2020.)

A testament to his joyous personality': the stars of Roger Michell's final film, If this was actually an Ealing picture, Stanley Holloway might have taken the lead role; as it is, Jim Broadbent plays the cussed and bloody-minded Bunton, a pipe-smoking individualist, autodidact and working man: JB Priestley without the establishment cachet or the university degree. He writes dozens of unpublished novels and unproduced plays, emotionally driven by the tragic death of his daughter, and is briefly imprisoned for refusing to pay for his licence on the grounds that he has removed the cathode that allows his set to receive the BBC. (It should be said that there is something a little bit Brexit about him.) His exasperated but loving wife Dorothy is played by Helen Mirren, who gives her all to this slightly underwritten role – at one stage knitting so fiercely that the needles clash like duellists' sabres. His loyal, decent son Jackie is played by Fionn Whitehead and Jackie's brother Kenny – imagined here as a bit of a ne'er-do-well – is played by Jack Bandeira...

The screenplay, co-written by Richard Bean and Clive Coleman, may not be 100% historically accurate – could you make a "food order" of fish and chips in a pub in the early 60s? – but it amusingly shows how the police and gallery authorities, anxious to minimise their embarrassment, insisted this audacious crime had to be the work of a sophisticated international criminal gang. And when Bunton's flowery anonymous notes finally come to light revealing him to be the culprit, the Tory home secretary Rab Butler (robustly played by Richard McCabe) snorts at his rhyming of "fortitude" and "sportitude" and says: "The man's a bloody poet! Perhaps we can lock WH Auden up at last!"

The story of Bunton and the Duke's portrait is very unusual for a high-concept Britpic in that the true story has a ready-made two-part plot, revealing a mystery you didn't know was there. There is a second act still to come just before the end, a narrative sting in the tail that is adroitly concealed in the structuring and editing. Broadbent's performance satisfyingly shows both the public and the private man to be the same: the stubborn eccentric and the individualist who

drives Dorothy up the wall, and the born standup comic who in court gets laughs from the jury and the press gallery. There is a fair bit of sentimentality here, but an awful lot of affection and energy as well.”

Peter Bradshaw, *the Guardian*, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2022.