

The Iron Lady: What were they thinking?

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Directed by Phyllida Lloyd, written by Abi Morgan

The Iron Lady, a fictional account of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's rise and fall, should have been at the very least interesting, even an important work. So how did it, with the sole exception of a truly remarkable performance by Meryl Streep as Thatcher, end up as such a spectacular misfire?

This is a poor piece of work. Without Streep's central performance, and that of the generally stellar cast in support, *The Iron Lady* would have all the emotional clout and artistic integrity of a Hallmark made-for-television movie.

On one level, how such a series of hopelessly compromising decisions could have been taken by the moving spirits behind the work, director Phyllida Lloyd and writer Abi Morgan, appears inexplicable.

Take as your subject the woman most closely associated with a period of dramatic social and political change and explosive class conflict—not just in Britain, but internationally—and reduce all that to a largely incoherent and uncritically presented backdrop. Then focus, in equal measure, on the frailty of a once powerful figure now suffering from dementia and a love story, presented in the form of a series of imagined interactions between Thatcher and her dead husband, Denis (Jim Broadbent).

This device is used to humanise Thatcher. As Phyllida Lloyd told the *Guardian*, her film is “About loss, about identity and old age and facing oblivion.... It's about us. It's about our mums. It's about our dads. And us. How we will be.... We're not asking people to vote differently. It's just a contemplation of mortality. This isn't a plea for forgiveness for policy. It's a contemplation of the cost of a big life.”

If that was all that *The Iron Lady* attempted to do, it would be a pretty shallow affair. After all, we know that Thatcher is a human being, with human frailties. But why choose the former prime minister, someone only interesting for the *specifics* of her public life, as the supposed embodiment of a universal human experience?

Things are made worse by the film's largely sympathetic treatment of Thatcher, including the presentation of her political views and actions in government. Lloyd describes Thatcher in fairly glowing terms, as a “a mighty leader who rises to power, against all the odds, who holds the line when others are losing their faith, who becomes a global superstar, and then, either through their own hubris or as they see it, the treachery of everyone around them, crashes to an ignominious end.”

A feminist herself, Lloyd casts Thatcher as something of a feminist icon, describing her own reaction to the latter's election victory in 1979 as “Yes! That is the first of us through the door.”

Morgan's script is informed by a similar sentiment. She told *Empire* magazine that “part of me admires her, part of me thinks she spoils several things.... You cannot do good without doing bad.”

In addition, she explained to the *Telegraph*, “Phyllida had a very strong idea that we were seeing things from Margaret's point of view.”

In that, at least, the film succeeds. Thatcher is pictured for the most part as she would see herself—as a person of strong conviction, surrounded on all sides by spineless men whose default mode is unprincipled compromise.

The treatment of the only other substantially developed character, Denis Thatcher, played by Broadbent as a jovial old curmudgeon, is particularly ludicrous. Thatcher was a fairly horrible man, a multimillionaire anti-communist, an admirer of South African apartheid, who described the population of Brixton in south London as “Fuzzy-Wuzzies”. This reality makes his use as a loveable foil to the cold and austere Thatcher saccharine, at times nauseatingly so.

Apart from Denis, most of the other characters have glorified walk-on roles—with the sole apparent purpose of making Thatcher look good by comparison. In fact, Thatcher rose to prominence in the Conservative Party as the figurehead of its right wing. She had a coterie of backers, who provided her with policy and direction.

However, the only other individual deemed by the filmmakers to have had any influence on her is Airey Neave (Nicholas Farrell), a far-right figure portrayed in a heroic light. Thatcher is depicted for the most part as a one-woman force of nature, a star who shone in glorious isolation with no explanation as to why such an admittedly divisive figure was chosen by the Tory Party and the entire ruling elite as its leader to fulfill their goal of “rolling back the frontiers of socialism.”

The only Labour Party figure depicted at any length is Michael Foot (Michael Pennington), who in one scene denounces Thatcher for her regressive economic and social policies. As for the presence of the working class, when Lloyd briefly depicts events such as the 1984-1985 miners’ strike and the anti-poll tax riots, she relies for the most part on news footage of various battles with the police.

The only political event given greater attention is the Falklands-Malvinas War. Here we see the most naked whitewash of Thatcher. After showing her as a child during the Luftwaffe’s bombing of Grantham, and as the victim of terrorism at the hands of the IRA, *The Iron Lady* offers us a version of the British prime minister as a new Winston Churchill. The open admirer of Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet, Thatcher is seen passionately pledging her determination to defeat the “fascists” of the Argentine Junta. The sinking of the ARA General Belgrano in May 1982, with 323 Argentine lives lost, while it was sailing away from and outside of Britain’s declared exclusion zone, is justified in the film by the military’s telling Thatcher that the ship could easily turn back and carry out a pincer movement.

Later, Foot is sitting dumbstruck on the opposition benches, as a victorious Thatcher tells him that now is the time for national unity, not carping. The real relationship between both Labour and the trade unions to Thatcher, including Foot’s support for her Falklands adventure, is never addressed. Her victories over the working class were not primarily won through police violence and legal repression, but through the betrayals of the trade unions and Labour’s adoption under Foot’s successor Neil Kinnock of a slightly watered-down version of Thatcher’s free-market economic orthodoxy.

Lloyd compares Thatcher’s downfall and subsequent fate to King Lear. She is even portrayed as being made almost mad with hubris when finally removed in a leadership challenge in November 1990. In fact, Thatcher had by that time become so deeply unpopular that the Tories feared electoral defeat. She was targeted by her pro-

European opponents and abandoned by many of her former allies in a party deeply divided over whether to take full part in the proposed European Single Currency. A decade later, aged 75, Thatcher began to show the first signs of dementia.

None of this is the stuff of great tragedy. Thatcher is not Lear. Her children, Mark and Carol, are not Goneril and Regan—and neither for that matter are Geoffrey Howe (Anthony Head) and Michael Heseltine (Richard E. Grant).

And here is the essential failing of *The Iron Lady*. No writer or director is obliged to attempt an exhaustive political treatment of the Thatcher years. However, a serious treatment must at least be honest, coherent and based on a degree of historical truth for any real emotional and psychological insight to be possible. Instead, what do we have? A depiction of Thatcher’s twilight years, still living in luxury and waited on by her staff, which is both uninvolved and unmoving despite the strenuous efforts of Streep.

Thatcher is indelibly associated with the shift by the ruling class away from policies rooted in class compromise and limited social reforms toward class confrontation and unbridled financial speculation—one that continued unabated under the incoming Labour government in 1997 with both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown having cited Thatcher as an inspirational figure.

The net result has been a historically unprecedented shift of societal wealth into the hands of a financial oligarchy.

The Iron Lady is released as David Cameron’s Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition is imposing savage austerity measures to make workers pay for the collapse facilitated by the free market nostrums on which Thatcher’s historical reputation depends. Under these conditions, to adopt a pose of impartiality in dealing with her life is not simply an artistic choice. It suggests a desire to produce something generally acceptable to the ruling elite, which plans to provide her a state funeral and wants no questioning of her legacy in such tense political and social circumstances.



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