Starting today, Mitch will be reviewing each of the five movies up for Best Picture of the Year when they give out the Oscars this weekend. We start out with "The Queen", which is an intimate behind the scenes glimpse at the interaction between Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Tony Blair in the wake of the death of Princess Diana on September 1, 1997. Tomorrow, we'll run Mitch's review of "Little Miss Sunshine". Monday, "Letters From Iwo Jima". Tuesday, "Babel". and Thursday "The Departed".

"Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English Way" – Pink Floyd in "Time"

I will readily admit it. I simply never understood the fascination in this country regarding Princess Diana. We fought a revolution because we rejected the concept of Royalty and the Devine Rights of Kings, so why were we so entranced by the wedding, tabloid life, and tragic death of a young woman from another country?

In some regard the movie "The Queen" helps. No, it doesn't help me out with the "why" as far as America goes, but it does reveal the psyche of a country where her death, and more importantly the reaction to her death by the Royal Family, were so emotional as to almost bring down the Monarchy. A fictionalized version of real events, it was a absorbing lesson in recent history that I did not expect going in.

Like last year's exemplary "Good Night, and Good Luck", this historical drama focuses on a

very short period of time rather than being a biopic of the life of Queen Elizabeth II. With the exception of a few short scenes depicting the initial election victory of Tony Blair in May of 1997, and a single scene at the end, all the action takes place in the seven day period from the crash that claimed Diana's life through her public funeral. But as opposed to "Good Night and Good Luck", this is more a character study of the people involved as opposed to a retelling of the circumstances.

The storyline itself is rather sparse. After Diana's death, the Royal Family does not feel any need to make public statements, nor return to London from their vacation palace Balmoral in Scotland. They, mostly in the form of the Queen, her husband Prince Phillip, and the Queen Mother, see it strictly as a private matter to be dealt with per protocol, aided by large amounts of stereotypical British Stoicism.

Back home in London, it is a far different story. The people of Great Britain are beside themselves in grief. Newscasts show numerous impromptu memorials for the Princess, and the front gate of Buckingham Palace quickly becomes overrun with flowers, stuffed animals, and written notes of sympathy. Two days after the crash, the people start to turn their anger towards the Royal Family, particularly Queen Elizabeth. The Royal Family's decision to treat it "with dignity and privacy" comes across to the general public as cold indifference at best or a rejection of Diana at worst.

As the newly elected Prime Minister with less than six months on the job, Tony Blair demonstrates an excellent political feel for the situation. He makes the first speech on the subject coming from a high government official, and endears himself to the citizens by his moving tribute, where he coins the phrase "the People's Princess" in reference to Diana. As his popularity skyrockets, some on his staff (and also his wife) recommend pushing the conflict in hopes of weakening the Monarchy and ushering in an absolute Republic. But although Blair is a Populist and a Modernist, he is not willing to advocate such a radical move. Instead, he spends most of the movie serving in the manner first designed for the Prime Minister, advising the King/Queen. Blair knows that in a 24/7 news cycle world, it is necessary to do things differently from "how they've always been done". The Queen may actually be right in regards to the funeral being a private matter, but "right or wrong" has nothing to do with it...it is a matter of perception and in this case the people must be appeased. So it falls to Blair the thankless task to convince the Queen to change her mind. A matter made much more difficult with the arrogant kibitzing from Prince Phillip (James Cromwell at his most obnoxious).

While this may all sound a bit boring, it's made infinitely more interesting due to a crisp and often moving script from Peter Morgan (who also wrote "The Last King of Scotand"), outstanding directing from Stephen Frears ("High Fidelity"), and most importantly, extraordinary work from the cast.

Helen Mirren gives one of the most remarkable performances from an actress I've seen in some time as Elizabeth II. The physical resemblance is, of course, uncanny...but it is in her amazing capturing of all the nuances of one of the world's most complicated women where her talent shines through. Mirren gives great insight into a woman who has ruled for forty-five years (as of 1997), and has seen the world change exponentially in that time. She captures the elitist attitudes of British high royalty quite well, but does not stoop to making Elizabeth into a haughty, uncaring person. Elizabeth does have feelings, but for the most part she keeps them to herself simply because she feels that as Queen, her personal feelings are not nearly as important as her Duty. However, in less guarded moments Mirren shows her as a woman deeply affected by all that is going on, and hurt by the thought that "her people" disapprove of her. In one touching scene, the ancient Land Rover she drives has broken down in a small stream on the estate ("the Queen would drive?", asks my wife...and then I do some research and find that young Elizabeth was trained as a driver in the British Army in WWII). Alone, and finally away from the eyes of all her subjects, including her family, she breaks down in tears.

Michael Sheen is almost the equal to Mirren as he gives an exceptional performance as Tony Blair. He also very much looks the part of the person he is playing; a young Prime Minister trying to act as the buffer between an angry populace and the seemingly clueless royals. "Will somebody PLEASE save these people from themselves!" Blair laments after his third or fourth attempt at convincing the Queen to make a statement is rebuked. Sheen effortlessly portrays all the qualities of a highly skilled politician and charismatic leader...saying all the right things and trying to be all things to all people without once coming across as a phony.

Alex Jennings shows Prince Charles in quite a different light as well...as a man emotionally frayed after Diana's death. In Jennings' performance, one can see a man conflicted between his past anger and contempt towards his ex-wife and his sorrow regarding her death, especially how it has impacted his two sons; a fact seemingly forgotten by the rest of the family. Charles also understands the political ramifications much better than his parents, and quietly works behind the scenes to encourage Blair in his efforts.

I came out of this movie thinking a lot differently than when I came in. Mostly, I have a much higher level of respect for the Queen, Prince Charles, and especially Tony Blair. It is highly doubtful that anyone in American politics could survive in the tabloid and confrontation heavy world of British politics. The portrayals given by Mirren and Sheen, said to be accurate by those familiar with the real people, show two very human public figures who best exemplify the expression “grace under fire”.

My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).