

GOLDA

THE POLITICS OF BIOPICS

Helen Mirren's portrayal of Golda Meir captures a political moment in time

Few film genres are as rich or as divisive as biopics, especially those featuring contemporary figures. The portrayals need to sit right with the memories of those old enough to recall the live personality.

Queen fans howled at multiple inaccuracies in 2018's *Bohemian Rhapsody*, particularly the fudged timeline that put Freddie Mercury's 1987 HIV diagnosis before his band's legendary 1985 Live Aid performance. Though Rami Malek snagged a best actor Oscar, the sloppiness cast a pall on the film's reception. By contrast, while historians grouched that Salieri didn't hate Mozart as depicted in the 1984 period piece *Amadeus*, the rest of us just saw a snazzy plot device. (F. Murray Abraham also scored an Oscar for his role as Salieri.)

The stakes are higher when the subject is a controversial political leader. Witness *Golda* (Aug. 25), which follows Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in the lead-up to and during 1973's Yom Kippur War. The film has narrative *gravitas* in droves, yet reviews following its premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February were middling. The *Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw called it "stately, stuffy and at times almost comatose TV-movie-type drama."

Apparently, not even the great Helen Mirren – so magnificent as Elizabeth II in 2006's Oscar-



From top: Golda Meir at the White House in 1973; Star Power: Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher; Anthony Hopkins as Richard Nixon; Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill

winning performance in *The Queen* – could marshal Meir's well-remembered kinetic resolve from beneath heavy prosthetic gear. Israeli director Guy Nattiv's film opened the 40th edition of the Jerusalem Film Festival last July, which suggests casting a non-Jew was seen as less potentially fraught than failing to substantively capture

Meir herself.

Winners do abound in the political-biopic canon. Oliver Stone's pitch-perfect *Nixon* from 1995 won raves for Anthony Hopkins, who summoned the peculiar hubris of "Tricky Dicky," netting an Oscar for his trouble. Ditto Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill in 2017's *Darkest Hour*. British director Phyllida Lloyd's *The Iron Lady*, meanwhile, ended up "mired in bland, self-important storytelling," according to film aggregator Rotten Tomatoes, though the 2011 film was buoyed by Meryl Streep's spot-on Margaret Thatcher, and nabbed the actress an Oscar.

On the flipside, after eight years of enduring the man in office, mainstream America had little appetite for more Dick Cheney despite Adam McKay's very snappy *Vice* from 2018. It was perhaps a case of what the Italians call *dietrologia*, roughly, the thing beneath the surface. Even before he was elected, the one-time Halliburton CEO was perceived as the ultimate insider, wielding power and influence not necessarily for the betterment of mankind.

Even widening the circle to include beloved if unelected political figures illustrates the perils of chronicling the famous (or infamous) in

a timely fashion. Before director Alan Parker's 1996 cinematic adaptation of the hit musical *Evita* began shooting, Argentina's then-president Carlos Menem and the archbishop of Buenos Aires protested the casting of Madonna as Eva Perón, an opinion underscored by graffiti in the capital demanding, "Evita Lives! Madonna Out!"

Wherever *Golda* ultimately lands on the critical or commercial register, it will – like all politically based biopics before it – sharply divide and possibly rile, as art attempting to imitate life so often does. There may be no better reason to see it. —Kim Hughes

DESIGN ✈️ DEPARTURE

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