



Her Majesty: The Best Film You Haven't Seen ... Yet

Analysis by Dr. Marc T. Newman

[MovieMinistry](#)

August 25, 2006

(AgapePress) - One of the greatest movie mysteries of my film-going life has not been played out on the silver screen, but rather in my inability to comprehend why more people have not seen *Her Majesty* (PG). When I speak on "Movies and Meaning" at conferences, I regularly reference this film, tell a bit about the plot, and inevitably somebody asks, "Where did you find this film?"

We are so used to having the studios tell us what movies to see, directed, cattle-like, by loud, frantic multi-million-dollar advertising blitzes using bandwagon techniques to herd us into multiplexes, that it is easy for a smaller, brilliant film, such as *Her Majesty*, to slip by unnoticed. Despite a fistful of awards, the beautifully-shot *Her Majesty* did not find its way into wide release. Fortunately you now have an opportunity to support the kind of movie that many people have told me they would like to get behind, but cannot find, at their local theater: a family-friendly movie that is also entertaining, challenging, heart-warming, complex, funny, and thought-provoking. *Her Majesty* comes out on DVD on August 29.

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Set in 1953, *Her Majesty* tells the story of a young, white New Zealander named Elizabeth -- a delightful girl who, when not practicing her steps for her marching team or innocently crushing on her coach, idolizes the queen of England. Upon discovering that the queen is planning a visit to New Zealand, Elizabeth begins a one-girl letter-writing campaign to try to put her rural town on the queen's travel itinerary. Against all odds, Elizabeth succeeds. The town is thrown into a frenzy of preparation and everything is nearly perfect -- except for the eyesore of a house, right at the entrance to the town, inhabited by Hira Mata, an old Maori woman.



Hira Mata (Vicky Haughton) and Elizabeth (Sally Andrews), in a scene from *Her Majesty*

Reclusive and mysterious, Hira is the object of mean speculation by the townsfolk and a victim of a band of young hooligans, led by Elizabeth's brother, Stuart. Shocked to see anyone treated so cruelly, Elizabeth seeks out Hira to try to make things right. Their first uncomfortable encounter slowly turns into friendship. As Elizabeth grows closer to Hira she learns the cost of befriending an outcast, and proud Hira must wrestle with her own prejudices. Along the way, long-buried town secrets are revealed and threats to Hira and Elizabeth mount as the time of the royal visit draws nearer.

What sets writer/director Mark Gordon's film far above most movies is his ability to craft a morally-complex world that manages to maintain a morally-certain center. He also bucks the trend of cultural self-loathing by creating an appreciative world where one need not hate or reject one's own culture to embrace what is beautiful in another's. Finally, there is an overwhelming sense of the ability of truth and grace to triumph over deceit and petty meanness.

Moral Ambiguity vs. Moral Complexity

"Dark" and "edgy" are adjectives that carry a lot of critical weight with many film reviewers. In order for a film to merit contemporary notice, it seems, key characters are required to embrace a kind of moral ambiguity that leaves audiences wondering who, if anyone, they can root for in the film. Audience members emerge from the theater uneasy and unsatisfied with the world they have witnessed. The alternative, nearly universally derided by the critical community, is a kind of moral certitude that paints characters in broad strokes -- the good guys in the white hats, and the bad guys in the black hats. In what many like to think of as our morally-ambiguous world, plots that have answers which are too easy to come by are dismissed as simplistic.

Her Majesty takes a third route. The complexity of the characters does not stem from their inability to know right from wrong. All of the characters inhabit a clear moral universe -- but the good characters are not pure embodiments of that morality. Like real people they make mistakes, have misunderstandings, broken trusts, and divided loyalties. *That they do not always do the right thing never negates the fact that there is a right thing to do.* The drama arises from the struggle to make wrong things right.

Hira Mata's family has suffered greatly at the hands of some of the white settlers. She has nursed her anger for decades, and while most of it is justified, it has turned her into a bitter old woman -- distrusting of everyone, even the young girl who just wants to get to know her.

Elizabeth is a generally good girl who struggles over obeying her father's order to stay away from Hira and the loyalty she feels toward her new friend. That the sickness of sin infects the world is never denied in *Her Majesty*. But instead of wallowing in it, or throwing up its hands in impotent surrender, the film reminds us that we can choose -- a brighter path wends its way through this dark world, we simply need the courage to take it.

No Need to Hate Your Culture to Embrace Others

Gordon knows where to draw the line between morality and the merely cultural. Many "culture clash" films -- most recently *The New World* -- try to paint all indigenous tribal members as morally pristine and all members of modernity as unredeemably decadent (unless, like Kevin Costner in *Dances With Wolves*, they "go native"). If you want to make things right, these films suggest, you have to renounce your birthright. C.S. Lewis warned of the dangers of national repentance because it allows us to ignore our own, personal faults and instead focus on those of our neighbors. Lewis was concerned about "the encouragement it gives us to turn from the bitter task of repenting our own sins to the congenial one of bewailing -- but, first, of denouncing -- the conduct of others." Gordon refuses to allow viewers the conceit of blaming cultural forces; these conflicts are personal.

Hira Mata's Maori culture is represented as beautiful and dignified, but Hira reveals to Elizabeth that it has been abandoned by its own young people who cannot be bothered to learn their own history. Hira lives in a dilapidated house, and only once do you see one of her relatives trying to help her out a little by doing some repairs. Conversely, the greed of the British colonists in grabbing Maori land is presented unsparingly, but then there is Elizabeth -- a lover of the crown, and Hira's most unflinching friend -- working hard weeding Hira's front yard. Elizabeth's father admires the Maori people and seeks to hire them at his factory. When he discovers that his son, Stuart, has been harassing Hira, he forces Stuart to come to her house and apologize.

Elizabeth is fascinated by Hira's culture: the talking stick Hira uses to remember her past, the moko tattooed on her lower lip, and the history of her people and her land. Elizabeth is never required to abandon her own heritage in order to embrace these beautiful features of Maori culture. Gordon constructs complex characters that embrace their cultures but are guided by a universal sense of morality, rather than cultural subjectivity, in exposing and dealing with problems. What emerges is a powerful and engaging look at a world we recognize at once, and a better world we hope someday will be.

The Triumph of Truth and Grace

What rings loudly throughout *Her Majesty* is the ability of friendship and truth to create reconciliation and justice. No one is completely innocent, but mercy is extended to those who seek it and wrongs are righted -- some in surprising and satisfying ways. And even the powerful, so often targeted in films as inherently corrupt, are given the chance to demonstrate that strength can be a servant of healing. These are the kinds of ideas that most people say they want to see embodied on the screen. Here's your chance.

It's Time to Put Up ...

Sometimes, if you want to find great films, you have to look hard for them. So much junk is supported by big studios that little films such as *Her Majesty* -- lacking a big advertising budget -- don't get nearly the screen time they deserve because they cannot financially afford to scream at you from your television set during a commercial break. And let's face it, much of what purports itself as being "family-friendly" film is not worth being shown on a public-access channel.

We can no longer afford to take the existence of filmmakers such as Mark Gordon for granted. We said we wanted the kind of stories he tells -- enchantingly filmed, complex tales that avoid overt preachiness while maintaining a moral center. He has told us one, and I know he wants to tell us another. But before he can, we need to learn to write our own script.

The story Hollywood would have you believe is that they have to make morally-stunted films like *Talladega Nights* and *John Tucker Must Die* because that is what people want. They know this because people buy tickets. Dollars talk in Hollywood.

Have you ever wondered why a wonderful local restaurant in your area was replaced by a

gigantic mediocre Burger Mart? People may have said that they loved the food at the old place, but they didn't spread the word enough to keep it alive. Mark Gordon is like that great Italian place down the street that has been locally owned and operated for years. *Her Majesty* is this week's special. If all the readers of this column who have a Blockbuster or Netflix account would put *Her Majesty* at the top of their queue, if they would pre-order a copy of *Her Majesty* online, it would go a long way toward preserving the kind of film environment you all say you want.

At MovieMinistry we talk about the cultural impact of film and we are not in the business of film promotion. But every once in a while I come across a unique movie that deserves more attention and I, frankly, try to champion it. *Her Majesty* is such a film. It's one of the best films you've never seen. And now is a great time to see it.

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