

Silver Arts Award

West Oxfordshire Academy of Performing Arts

My Review of The Darkest Hour

By Sophie Cridland

For my review, I went to go and see 'The Darkest Hour' at the cinema in Witney. From what I knew before I went to see it, I understood that it was a film about Churchill during WWII and the difficult decisions he had to make to try and save the British expeditionary force, which was being overwhelmed by the advancing German army and was at risk of being cut off. I found it a captivating story that gave an interesting insight into the events from a different perspective than one would normally see. I thought that it was clever the way the film showed you all the factors influencing the decisions that Churchill had to make, which helped the audience connect and sympathise with his situation. The film has a sense of determination and while at times he is shown as vulnerable, this helps the audience see him as a person with great responsibilities and also a lot struggles. The film also shows the effect of events on key characters in the British government and their motivations and aspirations. It paints Churchill as very human, determined and honourable yet lost all the same. It takes someone who he would not have traditionally looked to for support to open his eyes to the fact that he has supporters and people who will not give up on him, no matter if they are his family, the king, his cabinet or just ordinary people on a train. Overall, it is a very enjoyable film about the struggles that Churchill faced and how he managed to overcome them. It conveys a deep message about determination and the ability to see past things in your way. In my opinion, it is a good film that can be enjoyed by people of all ages, as it gives a good background to what is going on at the time and the motivations of everyone that is key to the storyline. As well as this though, it gives a strong message about resilience that could be interpreted in many different ways for different situations.

Directed by Joe Wright, the film stars Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill accompanied by multi-award-winning actress Lily James as Elizabeth Layton. They are joined by Kristin Scott Thomas as Clementine Churchill and Ben Mendelsohn as King George VI with Ronald Pickup as Neville Chamberlain and Stephen Dillane as Lord Halifax. It documents the first month of Winston Churchill's time as Prime Minister in 1940.

The film begins with a series of real photographs and footage from 1940 about the war, followed by historical information about what had happened and how far the war had progressed. This is very useful to help the film make sense to a wider audience, as while many may understand the vague concept of what was going on at that time, this ensures that they will understand the events of that time more clearly.

This inclusion of the original footage at the start of the film makes sure that the audience can understand that the primary antagonist is Hitler, though he does not appear in the rest of the film. This is important for the audience to be easily able to understand the story.

It also sets the scene for the main plot of the first part of the film at the same time by outlining how the war had demoralised Britain in terms of its faith in its current leader and sets the scene nicely by suggesting the search for a new leader is already underway, which helps to introduce Churchill into the film.

The opening shot sums up the main drive of the narrative – warring political parties deciding on who will be the next leader of their country and the first scene begins with an overhead shot of The House of Commons, displaying rows filled with politicians all furiously arguing. This is successfully used to display the discord and conflict between everyone in parliament and gives the impression that it is almost a broken system. The scene has an air of hopelessness and despondency.

The use of tense music in this scene also contributes to the atmosphere. It helps the audience realise that there is much at stake at this point in history and that the lack of good leadership could eventually condemn Britain to defeat.

With the next scene, in which we are introduced to Churchill, we are greeted with more upbeat music, giving the impression of a happier setting. In addition we are very briefly introduced to Churchill's habits as his new secretary (Elizabeth Layton) is given her introduction as to what is expected of her. The wide range of different shots used within this short segment (overhead, upwards moving, underneath, diagonal) indicates that he is dynamic and helps contribute to the impression that Churchill is already quite important, as it gives the scene a sense of slight urgency; everything is done quickly and in a very precise manner.

Almost immediately, we get an insight to Churchill's current mannerisms, when his new secretary arrives he begins to dictate his latest telegram without bothering to spare her a glance and then expects her to write it up without giving her the opportunity to even reach her desk. This shows the audience that he does not always think of others and considers himself to be very important and perhaps thinks that everything should be done for him as he is sat in bed, with his breakfast already delivered to him, composing his letter to someone for it to be written up by them rather than do it himself. He then proceeds to act rather harshly towards the new secretary and when she gets something wrong he shows little patience and respect towards her, rapidly losing his temper, becoming overbearing and adopting an almost bully-like persona. During this scene, Churchill also raises his voice repeatedly to convey his displeasure and the music tempo increases as the interaction between the two progresses and reaches a crescendo as she hastily leaves the room in tears. The scene in which his wife, having seen the new secretary exit his room crying, goes to speak with him reveals to the audience that he has only been acting in this fashion of late. This is a very important addition to the film, and helps to develop the audience's sympathy towards him.

Slightly later in the film, we witness Churchill's first speech to Parliament as Prime Minister. Despite the unenthusiastic response he receives we are shown how a great deal of thought was put into the speech. This is achieved through the use of numerous flashbacks which display him composing the speech at many different times in his day, correcting things, making notes and perfecting it. This enables the audience to connect a little better with Churchill, as rather

than just showing him making the speech and other people's reactions to it, we are shown the entire process of making it and are able to fully appreciate the thought and effort that was put into the presentation.

The audience is also helped to follow the sequence of events in an orderly timeline, as the film features large titles at the beginning of some of the scenes, alerting the audience to a change in the date or country setting. This helps the audience to follow the story and understand how quickly or slowly things are happening, which is useful in understanding the plot in detail.

As he gives his speech to the general public via a radio broadcast, Churchill announces that 'advancements have been made'. However, as we already know, this is a lie, purely said to give the public hope that is not really there and to encourage everyone to keep fighting. To emphasise this point, the film transitions flawlessly from a close-up of Churchill's face while he makes his speech, to a French battlefield as it is bombed and the battlefield seamlessly becoming a dead soldier's dirty, muddy face as the fire is reflected in his eyes which then turns back into Churchill's face illuminated red by the 'on-air' light for his broadcast.

We are given a valuable insight into some of Churchill's struggles, some of which are between him and other members of his own party. For example, since he became Prime Minister he constantly quarrels with Lord Halifax as he does not follow the same agenda laid out by the former Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Because of this, Halifax seeks to overthrow him by the use of his and Chamberlain's resignations, followed by a vote of no confidence, which he hopes would set the country straight again and on the path of negotiating peace talks with Germany and Hitler. However, Churchill is adamant that the correct course is to continue to fight and to never surrender. He is forced, however, to agree to hear Germany's terms after Halifax threatens to resign, as he knows he needs Halifax's political support for the time being. The director develops a great tension in this scene, by the effective use of dramatic music, with tempo and volume increasing markedly as the scene progresses, to the point where Churchill is forced to give in to Halifax's demands and consider peace negotiations.

The inclusion of Churchill's disputes with Halifax is essential to the audience's understanding of how he faced opposition not just from Hitler's Germany, but also from within the British establishment. It is also vital to developing Churchill's character and showing his different personality traits. For example, though he is rarely shown as being calm in the war discussions room, when he is alone with Halifax he is much harsher and angrier and we again see a side to him that was mostly previously unknown. This helps the audience to further connect with Churchill by interpreting his character and his motivations in different situations. Thus his continued conflict with Halifax is key to the understanding of the storyline and without it in the film, Churchill's character would certainly be less well-developed and understood.

Though Churchill is consistently portrayed as rather harsh and self-centred throughout the film, we as the audience are given the opportunity to view his softer side in a scene where he comforts Elizabeth after she is forced to write on a telegram to Brigadier Nicholson that 'The evacuation will not take place'. This further develops his character and also makes him more likeable to the audience.

The film uses transitions particularly well in the next part, where Churchill shows his secretary the map room. Though of course people are worried about the war in London, where the centre of operations is, it also comes with a kind of serenity that could not be found in a place of war, with people going about their daily jobs normally. After the shocking revelation that the men have at most two days to live, the film takes advantage of a shot of everyone's defeated faces as the truth they have been trying not to admit is revealed to them, and switches to a bunker on the battlefield where the senior officer is walking among the dead and injured, offering words of comfort and encouragement. This helps to remind the audience of the horrors of war, and ensures that they are able to comprehend the entire story and how one part relates to another in the timeline. They also use transitions and a metaphor at the same time, that 'something can happen in the blink of an eye' by switching back to the secretary blinking her tears away which then becomes a bomb dropping on the very place they had discussed earlier where the evacuation would not take place.

This same softness is repeated in a shared moment between Churchill and Elizabeth in which they both silently cry, her mourning for the loss of her brother, and him for all the men who have died. This is key to presenting Churchill as human and something more than just a figurehead.

We are also shown Churchill's desperation and frustration as he telephones Ramsey to inquire about the flotilla of private boats that would be used to rescue the troops from Dunkirk. We can see this as he raises his voice and slams the phone down in frustration after Ramsey is unable to tell him how many boats they now have. This shows the audience that although he may appear to be making sacrifices of men heartlessly, he is actually deeply affected by the losses, which enables the audience to connect with him much better as it makes him seem much more human, with real emotions, rather than cold and heartless.

As we witness Churchill sit in the dark towards the end of the film he appears defeated and hopeless. But we then get to see a wonderful moment between him and his wife, Clementine Churchill, as she reminds him of all the things that make him a good person and how all his imperfections only contribute to that. It is a very well chosen scene to include in the film, as it can connect with audiences of all ages and can be applied to lots of different situations. It conveys a strong message of determination and perseverance, which Churchill is often remembered for, and shows us how in real life he may have received encouragement from lots of different people in his life.

Throughout the film, we witness Churchill's strained relationship with George VI, who was the king at that time. Initially the King expresses his lack of confidence in Churchill during Neville Chamberlain's resignation audience. Then we see that their regular discussions are stilted and awkward. Later the King calls Churchill to make clear he did not approve of what he had said in his broadcast to the nation. However near the end of the film, when Churchill seems at his most despondent, he is surprised to receive support from George VI who reveals that while he had his reservations about handing over leadership to him, he agreed with his ideas far more than he did with Halifax's. He lends Churchill much needed support and advice and helps him to figure out what his next move should be to protect the country. This gives us an example of how

while he consistently argued with some of his critics, he was able to change his relationships with some others, showing him as able to win the hearts and minds of even the most severe critics. It reinforces his reputation as a true leader.

We are also, as the audience, helped to see Churchill in a much more human and positive light as near the end of the film he boards the London Underground. Here he interacts with the ordinary people he meets there and shows them how he values their opinions by asking what they would think of him, were he to surrender. There is a section where they all introduce themselves to him too, and this is what really makes him more likeable to the audience. As he goes around, greeting them, he repeats their names. At the time it appears as though this is only out of politeness. However, when he then proceeds to address his outer cabinet in Parliament we see him list off the names of those ordinary people as names of the people he has spoken with on the matter he is addressing them about. This not only shows how he thinks that their opinions should be heard and respected, but it also makes him seem very down to earth as a person from the audience's perspective and proves that he really cares about the people of his country.

In the last scene of the film, Churchill addresses The Commons with his famous 'We shall fight on the beaches' speech. In this, he manages to gain the approval and trust of nearly everyone present, including the former Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who had been plotting to oust him from office and replace him with Halifax. The very careful use of music in this scene contributes to the feeling of tension and importance surrounding this particular speech, which has been widely recognised as one of the greatest speeches ever made in history. The music starts off subtly, barely noticeable, allowing the audience to fully concentrate on his words. While still soft throughout, it becomes more noticeable, along with the tempo and volume increasing as the speech progresses, reflecting his growing confidence and fuelling the atmosphere. It lends more power to his words, ensuring that the performance is highly memorable.

After that there ensues a series of more historical facts, documenting what happened to some of the main characters, including Churchill, Neville

Chamberlain and Viscount Halifax. It also records when the war ended, giving the piece a feel of finality, rather than feeling unfinished and incomplete.

We are also greeted with the quote 'Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts' by Winston Churchill himself. This further aids the image of him that while he has his doubts, overall determination and perseverance are his main qualities, securing the audience's view of him.

I have to praise the director, Joe Wright for bringing such a sense of humanity to the characters in this film, and really developing the personal relationships between them and wonderfully bringing them to life. I have no doubt that with a different director it would be unlikely that there would be that same sense of really being able to relate to these characters. He told the story beautifully, and really painted a picture of that short period in time that no one who has seen the film will ever forget.

Throughout the film, I feel that the use of music was perfect. It helped to enhance every scene it was used in, whether to add tension, or to set a happier tone to the events. It is one of my favourite elements of the film, as I feel without it there just would not have been the same wonder and amazement for the scenes that it so dramatically changed. For example, what some people could find to be an ordinary, boring speech on its own changed into a motivational, captivating declaration that would later become one of the best known in English history. Constructed by Dario Marianelli, a multi award winning Italian composer, it is beautifully composed throughout the film, emphasising points at just the right times and making the film that bit more memorable and mesmerising.

Lily James as Elizabeth Layton is often used as the eyes of the audience as a lot of the story is told from her perspective and it offers fresh eyes and a fresh insight, one which would not often be witnessed.

I also have to say how well the costumes worked. Everyone's costumes, from Churchill and the King, to Churchill's wife, Elizabeth Layton and just the ordinary people in the street were all intricately designed. The design process must have been very well thought out to achieve the detail that they did. It succeeded

spectacularly in creating the impression that it really was London in the 1940's, which helped enormously to create the right atmosphere.

I must also applaud the hair and makeup teams that must have worked tirelessly on the film, to make sure that every detail was perfect. The prosthetics used to transform Gary Oldman into Winston Churchill were really spectacular and he really was unrecognisable under it all and appeared just like Churchill. They also had to make sure that while he looked just like Churchill, his performance was not hidden under all the prosthetics, which they definitely succeeded in doing. I imagine it would have taken ages to simply design everything, let alone apply it perfectly, precisely and identically every single time, but it was achieved wonderfully. It must have been an incredibly difficult task to undertake, but it was pulled off very well and the end effect was brilliant.

The attention to detail throughout the film also really helped to create the right atmosphere, and really made you believe it was real. Even things that would typically be overlooked would have completely changed the mood of the film, were they not done perfectly. For example, back then, London was much dirtier and if they had used current London, it just would not have looked realistic. They also managed to create a war room that was almost completely identical to the one that was actually used back then. The proportions being right, everything being in the right place, just helped to lend the feeling of reality to the piece. Even the pins on the map to show where each army was were placed exactly where they were in real life, which must have taken an awful lot of time to get right, and just shows the dedication of the design team to getting everything right.

Although they were given permission to film in the House of Commons, nobody would have been permitted to sit down, so they had to build their own, identical version. I have visited the real House of Commons and I can definitely say the detail was impeccable, creating essentially a carbon copy of the real thing. While watching the film I truly believed that they had filmed it in the real place.

Throughout the course of the film, a predominantly grey and muted accent is used to convey an air of seriousness and importance and sets a sombre tone for the piece. It carries with it a sense of grave importance and dread should something go wrong.

Gary Oldman really managed to capture the very essence of Churchill, with his mannerisms and personality in this film. He must have very carefully studied Churchill to be able to get all of his mannerisms, gestures and movements correct. He really took over the persona of Churchill to recreate him perfectly, which was complemented by his wonderful recreation of his famous speeches and the careful and intricate use of some of his iconic features such as his cigar, watch chain, ring, spectacles and his assortment of hats.

I honestly cannot fault the transitions used throughout the film, as I feel that they were perfectly timed and placed, and were executed absolutely flawlessly. They enabled the film to keep a sense of fluidity about it, rather than being jerky and shaky. They were one of my favourite points of the film as they were done so creatively and held with them a real sense of imagination and clearly had a lot of thought, time and effort put into them.

The film received positive critic's reviews with Dan Jolin from Empire stating *'Churchill's darkest hour is Gary Oldman's finest. Gripping, touching, amusing and enlightening, his performance is the prime reason this film must be seen — but not the only one.'* As well as awarding it four stars. Peter Debruge from Variety also said *'Wright is both a virtuoso filmmaker and a natural showman, interpreting the screenplay as no other director could have possibly imagined it.'* Ann Hornaday from the Washington Post also commented *'Handsomely filmed, intelligently written, accented with just a dash of outright hokum, Darkest Hour ends a year already laden with terrific films about the same subject — including the winsome comedy-drama "Their Finest" and Christopher Nolan's boldly visual interpretive history "Dunkirk" — and ties it up with a big, crowd-pleasing bow.'* The film also received a rating of 75% on Metacritic, 85% on Rotten Tomatoes and 6.9/10 on IMDb.

In addition, the film received over 20 nominations for awards, including Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Cinematography, Best

Costume Design and Best Production Team along with BAFTA Award nominations for Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Best Film, Best British Film, Best Film Music, Best Cinematography, Best Production Design and Best Costume Design among many others. They were awarded the Academy Award for Best Makeup and Hairstyling and the BAFTA Award for Best Makeup and Hair and Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Makeup. Gary Oldman (Winston Churchill) also received the Academy Award for Best Actor, the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor – Motion Picture – Drama, the BAFTA Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role, the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Leading Role, the Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best actor, the Satellite Award for Best Actor – Motion Picture and the AACTA International Award for Best Actor.

In conclusion, I found the film to be highly interesting and definitely one I would recommend. It was a gripping film that really captured the audience's attention and ensured that they not only understood everything that was happening, but could also relate to the characters and really understand them. I am very pleased that I chose to see the film and I am certain that I will find myself watching it many more times in the future.