

Film Review : Bohemian Rhapsody

Bohemian Rhapsody

Direction: Bryan Singer

Screenplay: Anthony McCarten

Cast: Rami Malek, Lucy Boynton

Length: 134 minutes

Rating: 12A

After the commercial success of 'Mamma Mia!' ten years ago and 'Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again' this year, two musical films based on the ABBA back catalogue, it seemed it would only be a matter of time before the music of Queen would be on the cinema screen. Not only are ABBA and Queen still both hugely popular and unashamedly flamboyant, they are just two examples of a select group of artists whose every song could be their signature single.

From the beginning, these two bands developed an impressive ability to consistently combine an extremely high quality of melodic and lyrical writing, often exploring the timeless and universal themes of the human condition, which would also entertain a mainstream audience. Unlike most artists, every song by ABBA and Queen can be regarded as a hit single worthy of radio play forever because they are by nature both listener friendly and meaningful.

But now the time has come for Queen to receive the Hollywood musical treatment. (And it's about time!) Setting the tone of a party atmosphere before the film itself begins, even the 20th Century Fox logo fanfare gets the Queen Guitar makeover. A main titles opening displaying the exciting backstage preparation of Queen's performance at the Live Aid concert in 1985 is a stylishly edited sequence, largely emblematic of the rest of the film. Start as you mean to continue.

'Bohemian Rhapsody' charts the story of Queen from its formation in 1970s London to that legendary Live Aid set at Wembley Stadium 15 years later at the peak of their careers. Originally born Farrokh Bulsara in Zanzibar (now Tanzania) before moving to Britain at 17 years of age with his family to escape the Zanzibar Revolution, Freddie Mercury (Malek) was a stage name of his own creation due to his being of Parsi descent and large overbite casting him as an outsider. He meets his future Queen bandmates by chance when their lead singer leaves and proves himself to them with his unique sound and vocal prowess. And the rest, as they say, is history.



Still from the film courtesy of 21st Century Fox

After convincing his bandmates and a sceptical audience, he must now persuade his father of his musical ambitions. "You don't get anywhere pretending you're someone you're not", his father tells him. But Mercury isn't pretending. His stage name is who he really wants to be with his home life being the performance, the pretence he wants to leave behind. Mercury was a mass of contradictions, much like the very meaning of Queen itself. His courtship with Mary Austin (Boynton) was loving but false and his relationship with John Reid, Queen's second manager, was instinctive but unhealthy.

Similarly to 'Dreamgirls', in epic story, steady direction, plethora of outstanding songs and glossy production values, 'Bohemian Rhapsody' revolves around the central character of Queen's lead singer Mercury. Upon the release of the eponymous song of the title of this film, the critics' reaction at the time was amusingly misunderstood (a polite way of putting it, as I am one after all) since it would become their magnum opus winning the BRIT Award for British Single and be inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

From one amazing set piece to the next, the film is refreshingly undemanding even at its most dramatic moments. While I can appreciate some films as works of art, that doesn't mean that I found them pleasurable to watch and wouldn't watch them again for pure enjoyment. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is thankfully not one of those. While the film does portray the isolation and depression, public conflicts and private exploitation endured by Mercury at the darkest times in his life, being aimed at a mainstream audience, the film adopts a light approach.

Some, however, have criticised this decision and other historical inaccuracies. While important to note, they forget this is fictional filmmaking based on a true story and not a documentary. Of course it obviously doesn't portray the realities of substance abuse or alcohol addiction to the extent of 'Walk the Line', but it still acknowledges the destructive rock 'n' roll lifestyle. We're never transported to such darkness that we can't recover and the line is never crossed from satisfaction to sufferable allowing us to simply enjoy the masterpiece that is Queen's discography, the whole point of the film.

When I attended on opening night, the audience applauded upon its conclusion. Need I say more?

For the finale of 'Bohemian Rhapsody', the recreation of Queen's complete set at Live Aid 1985 is an absolute work of

genius. There is Rami Malek who achieves the almost impossible challenge of physically performing with the explosive force of Mercury on stage. With wonderful use of shallow depth of field, period graphics for captions and sound design on those passionate songs, this film also has an outrageous sense of humour to match the great man himself.

Just as Live Aid 1985 brought Queen to a whole new audience over four decades ago, this film will define them to another generation. After five nominations, only this year did Queen receive its first Grammy, for Lifetime Achievement. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' is the cinematic presentation of Queen's legacy and will do for them what 'Mamma Mia!' did for ABBA.

God Save the Queen!

'Bohemian Rhapsody' is in cinemas now.

8/10