

“Bohemian Rhapsody” by Audrey Royall: The Cavalier Volume 38 Issue 2 December 2018

*Bohemian Rhapsody*, a biopic released about the life of Freddie Mercury, lead singer of the British rock band Queen, met box office success as it became the second highest grossing music biopic of all time. The film begins with the familiar tune of Queen’s hit “Somebody to Love” accompanied by a montage of Mercury preparing for Queen’s 1985 performance at Live Aid—a charity concert intended to raise money for those impacted by the Ethiopian Famine—before flashing back 15 years to 1970 before Queen is formed. Mercury’s background is explicitly shown: Born as Farrokh Bulsara in Zanzibar, the film acknowledges his Parsi heritage, a nice touch on a fact that at times goes unmentioned. From there, the movie moves at a rapid pace as Mercury joins with guitarist Brian May, drummer Roger Taylor, and bass player John Deacon to form Queen. They soon achieve success with the hit “Killer Queen” and go on to become sensations both in the domestically in the United Kingdom and internationally. The second half of the movie concerns Mercury’s sexuality, his relationship with best friend and ex-fiancée Mary Austin, and the rifts that occur between him and the rest of the band.

From a film standpoint, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a powerful narrative. From a historical standpoint, it is criticized as straying from crucial accuracies which impact the perception of characters. For example, Mercury is demonstrated to be the sole member of Queen who wishes to pursue solo projects, thus breaking the band apart. In reality, Taylor had already released two solo albums and the group mutually decided on a break but within months started working together on a new album *The Works*, before touring and playing for Live Aid two months after the tour’s conclusion. Mercury’s HIV diagnoses also occurred two years after Live Aid, and he told the other members of Queen about it in 1989, another two years later. In the film, the diagnosis is disclosed to Mercury before the Live Aid performance. He then, in turns, tells all the members of the band shortly thereafter. It then serves as a motivating factor in Queen’s Live Aid performance. The use of his diagnosis to further the narrative of the movie is questionable, to say the least.

Hollywood’s version, while expectedly a dramatized version of events, distorts the truth and makes clear the faults of Mercury while the other band members are not shown in such multidimensional lighting. This could plausibly be accounted for by the the fact that Brian May and Roger Taylor served both as Executive Music Producers and consultants for the film. Thus, they have complete control of the narrative in ways that Freddie Mercury, due to his death in 1991, is not able to have. It has also been speculated that the film also gives a watered-down version of events due to its PG-13 rating.

In all, however, the film is a compelling narrative that while perhaps straying from the true meaning of a biopic in an effort to add Hollywood flare, is still an enjoyable and inspiring watch.