

THE INDEPENDENT

First Night: W.E., Venice Film Festival

So Wallis Simpson was a victim – and Madonna can direct
By Geoffrey Macnab

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No one knew quite what to expect of Madonna's film about Wallis Simpson. Many in Venice were anticipating (and some actively hoping) for a prize turkey along the lines of her earlier *Filth and Wisdom*. They'll have been disappointed by the sheer zest and craftsmanship of *W.E.*

The film is no masterpiece. It has a very cumbersome narrative structure (flitting between Simpson's story and that of "Wally Winthrop", a young woman in late 1990s New York obsessed by her) and takes a strangely reverential attitude toward the British aristocracy of the 1930s. Occasional moments – the scene in which Mohamed al Fayed lets Wally (Abbie Cornish) read Simpson's letters or



Wallis Simpson pogo-ing to the strains of The Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant" – provoke titters. Nonetheless, the film boasts a remarkable performance from Andrea Riseborough as Wallis Simpson – one that captures Simpson's hauteur but makes her seem far more sympathetic and vulnerable than the caricature of Simpson in *The King's Speech*.

Madonna's visual style owes more to Wong Kar-Wai's *In The Mood For Love* than to traditional British costume dramas. Swooping camerawork, slow motion, fetishised close-ups, and delirious music are used in even the most routine scenes. At times, as Simpson sashays into frame in yet another gorgeous new dress, it is as if we are watching a *Vogue* photo-shoot recreation of the 1930s rather than a movie. The visual inventiveness blinds us to the occasional banality of the storytelling.

Wally is unhappily married to an arrogant psychoanalyst. She used to work at Sotheby's in New York. When the auctioneers hold a sale of Edward and Simpson's estate, she is a constant presence there, poring obsessively over their old possessions and fantasising about Simpson's life.

Madonna's perspective on Simpson is bound to be hotly debated. The film offers a strongly revisionist account of Simpson, portraying her as a victim rather than as the opportunistic divorcée who cost Edward his throne. W.E. pours scorn on the idea that Simpson and Edward (attractively played by James D'Arcy) were Nazi sympathisers. The same characters and incidents that featured in *The King's Speech* are shown here but are invariably given a very different interpretation.

The modern-day sequences are markedly less effective than those showing the gilded, glamorous 1930s. By looking at the Wallis Simpson story through the eyes of her young present-day admirer, Madonna is clearly signalling that the film is subjective: an interpretation rather than a straight biopic. However, the attempts to draw parallels between Simpson and "Wally" are often strained. Both yearned to be mothers. Both had bad experiences at the hands of abusive husbands. What Madonna doesn't make clear is just why Wally so admires Mrs Simpson in the first place. The story of her own burgeoning romance with a Russian security guard (Oscar Isaac) is far-fetched. It is also markedly less compelling than the romance between Simpson and the King forced to abdicate.

Many will feel we've had quite enough of the Windsors on screen already. However, Madonna is far less interested in the seismic effect the relationship Edward VIII and Simpson had on British society than in telling the story of a glamorous outsider whose romantic yearnings made her one of the most notorious women in the world.