

Madonna Helms 'Romance of the Century'

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New movie 'W.E.' revisits scandalous affair of King Edward VIII and American socialite



The Academy Award-winning 2010 film *The King's Speech* told the story of King George VI of England's stammer and petrifying ascension to the throne. Now the story of his older brother, who abdicated his sovereignty for love, is set for the big screen.

In *W.E.*, director and co-screenwriter Madonna takes a unique approach to the true-life 1930s love story involving King Edward VIII (James D'Arcy) and American socialite and divorcée Wallis Simpson (Andrea Riseborough). The film recounts their saga through the eyes of Wally Winthrop (Abbie Cornish), a late-1990s doctor's wife in upscale New York.

Abused and miserable in her own marriage, Winthrop – who was named after Simpson – researches this intriguing woman online and spends long hours at the auction house displaying her jewelry and clothing. At Sotheby's, Simpson meets a charming Russian security guard (Oscar Isaac), whose understanding of her obsession cements the underlying love story in *W.E.*

"I was always fascinated with the story of Wally Simpson and King Edward VIII's decision in the Thirties to abdicate the throne for the woman he loved," Madonna told reporters this week at the Toronto International Film Festival. "I went to investigate that story and his reasons and try to understand what it was about this woman that would lead this guy to make such a big sacrifice, but I was never interested in making a straightforward biopic.

"So I created the modern-day story of the modern-day character of Wally Winthrop, so that I could have a point of view in which to tell the story, because truth is subjective. We can all read the same history book and have a different point of view. So it was important for me to not present the story and say, 'This is the one and only story,' but to say, 'This story moved me and inspired me.' That's how the two love stories were created."

Madonna, who acted in her first film, 1985's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, at the start of her pop music career, won a Golden Globe in 1997 for Best Actress for her role as Eva Perón in *Evita*. *W.E.* is the second film she has directed, following 2008's comedy *Filth & Wisdom*. With *W.E.* scheduled for wide release in December, just in time for the Oscar-qualifying deadline at the end of the year, Madonna said, "My legs and my fingers are crossed."

When asked if she feels any pressure in the film world, she said, "Of course I do, because it's new. I had the same kind of pressure when I began my music career. I was nervous and I didn't know what to expect, and people didn't know what to expect. I had to earn my way [to] being taken seriously in the music department, and now I'm well aware that I have to do the same in the world of film."

For Madonna, part of the attraction to "the greatest romance of the century" was the celebrity aspect of King Edward and Wallis Simpson, who became the subject of intense media scrutiny and public vilification and were ostracized by the Royal Family. Edward may have given up the throne, but Simpson, stressed and depressed, gave up her freedom as they took up residency in France awaiting an invitation to return to England.

"I was interested in the idea or the concept of the cult of celebrity, which we are all consumed with, now and then," said Madonna. "There are so many rumors that are now believed to be true about Wallis Simpson. When I investigated her story, there were so many of them, yet I could find no empirical evidence stating that they were true."

"I realized that we have always – since the time of Christ or Cleopatra, or you can go back through history and name any iconic or historical figure – it's like Chinese whispers. It starts off as one story and by the time it gets to us, it's something different, and we believe it to be true. And we often reduce our historical figures, or our iconic figures, to a sound-bite. And it's tremendously unfair," she said. "We forget that they are human beings. What was important to me was to portray Wallis Simpson as a human being with flaws, imperfections and a human, vulnerable side."

W.E.'s concurrent, interweaving stories – one of a man giving up the most powerful position in Britain for a woman; another, a woman leaving an abusive husband no matter how luxurious her lifestyle – are not just about love, Madonna says, but having the courage to make difficult choices.

"The message of the film is to realize that in the end happiness lies in your own head and that we are in fact in charge of our destiny," she said.