GARY OLDMAN

Darkest Hour

Though Gary Oldman has long been commended for his elastic range as an actor, few could have foreseen that the man who once played Sex Pistol Sid Vicious would give one of the screen's most persuasive impersonations of Britain's wartime prime minister Winston Churchill. From the self-destructive Sid – a surprisingly gentle, domesticated performance – to the saviour of the nation in the crisis month of May 1940 is an astounding stretch, notwithstanding the three decades between Alex Cox's *Sid & Nancy* (1986) and Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*. Even allowing for Oldman's maturation as an artist and as a man, his ability to inhabit Churchill so accurately and with such emotional resonance was a reach beyond reasonable limits, and it raises the question: could Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness, or Daniel Day-Lewis have pulled it off?

In the past he had relied upon two main styles. He had either channelled his own opaque, often neuroticised persona, in films as diverse as *Honest, Decent and True* (1985), *The Firm* (1988), *Chattahoochee* (1989), *Heading Home* (1990), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993), as James Gordon in three Batman films, and even as Sirius Black in four *Harry Potter* outings. Or he had opted for flamboyant mimicry, sometimes aided by elaborate makeup, in, for example, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), *True Romance* (1993), *Immortal Beloved* (1994), *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Hannibal* (2001) – and *Tiptoes* (2003), in which he was credible as a dwarf. Oldman's Winston represents a triumphant return to flamboyance. His performance is the centrepiece of Wright's definitive film about Churchill's war leadership. *Darkest Hour* is as much a companion piece to Wright's own *Atonement* (2007) – with its bravura Dunkirk tracking shot – as it is to Christopher Nolan's recent *Dunkirk*. It is a rousing account of the decision by the newly appointed prime minister to fight on against Germany in late May-early June 1940 rather than agree to the urging of Lord Halifax (gamely played by Stephen Dillane), and to a lesser extent the former prime minister Neville Chamberlain (Ronald Pickup), that Britain enter negotiations with Hitler on the back of the French capitulation and the retreat to the Channel coast of the British Expeditionary Force following its defeat in France and Flanders.

Absent from a rowdy debate in the House of Commons, Churchill is first seen taking breakfast in bed in his private residence – the scene neatly setting up the idea that he will rise like one of the 'lions after slumber' in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetic call to action 'The Masque of Anarchy' (albeit as an establishment pugilist rather than a non-violent anarchist). He's soon roaring at his new personal secretary Elizabeth Layton (Lily James) for typing in single-spaced rather than double-spaced lines, causing her to run from the room in tears. This incident did take place – no matter that Layton didn't become Churchill's personal secretary until May 1941. It's an acceptable shuffling of chronology, since Layton gives younger viewers, who might not know much about Churchill, an attractive identity figure. An overly sentimental moment

comes when Layton tells Churchill that her soldier brother has died overseas, and then asks him why he is studying her. ‘I’m just looking at you,’ he says, Oldman’s voice oozing treacly compassion. Two other encounters that persuade Churchill not to agree to peace talks under Mussolini’s aegis – an unexpectedly matey chat with the incensed King George VI (Ben Mendelsohn), and a ride on the tube when Churchill polls his fellow passengers – seem implausible yet are acceptable within the film’s universe.

These scenes scarcely impair the power of Oldman’s performance, though it might be observed that Churchill is over-needy, if not a little infantilised, in his interaction with his wife, Kristin Scott Thomas’s Clemmie (it echoes his joking admission that all babies look like him). It is hard to square the warrior with the childlike spouse or the sweet grandfatherly type, yet worth noting that Layton alluded to such inconsistency in her book, *Mr Churchill’s Secretary* (originally published in 1958 under her married name Elizabeth Nel): ‘That great man – who could at any time be impatient, kind, irritable, crushing, generous, inspiring, difficult, alarming, amusing, unpredictable, considerate, seemingly impossible to please, charming, demanding, inconsiderate, quick to anger and quick to forgive – was unforgettable. One loved him with a deep devotion. Difficult to work for – yes, mostly; loveable – always; amusing – without fail.’

That passes as a reasonable review, too, of Oldman’s portrayal, omitting only his rendering of Churchill’s belligerence, fury and oratorical power. Like a captain of industry, dominated by his wife but formidable in the company of men, Oldman’s Churchill overawes, not without difficulty, his war cabinet and the outer cabinet, eventually overturning Parliament’s scepticism with his rhetoric. Watching Oldman deliver Churchill’s calculatedly matter-of-fact 4 June ‘We shall fight on the beaches’ speech to the House of Commons in a bellicose growl sent more shivers down my spine than any speech I’ve heard in a movie since Kenneth Branagh brought his oboe-like voice to the St Crispin’s Day speech in *Henry V* (1989). Nationalism may be an unqualified evil, but love of country dies harder in the breast.

Oldman’s oration is not identical to Churchill’s. Given the cinema’s need to exaggerate, the peroration – ‘We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender’ – is understandably more heightened than Churchill made it and different in nuances. Oldman underemphasises the word ‘air’, to which Churchill gave a rhetorical (even aristocratic) lift, and thunders out the word ‘surrender’, which Churchill downplayed. Despite these changes, the speech remains thrilling.

Oldman hauls his added bulk around with aplomb, nailing Churchill’s hurried short stride, as well as his aggressive posture of standing with his palms pressed flat into his back, so that his arms are akimbo behind him. With expert prosthetic work by Kazuhiro Tsuji, Oldman becomes the most Churchillian of Churchills when he irritatedly compresses his lips so the lower one is a long rubbery stripe or juts it out in moments of anger or defiance, or

when he's in repose. Very occasionally the camera glimpses Oldman peeking out of Churchill's Humpty Dumpty face in medium close-ups, but he disappears entirely in profile shots, which accent the protruding lip and the character's sparse ash-coloured hair (oddly touching when it's uncombed): you'd swear Churchill had been resurrected. Of course, none of the padding or prosthetics or facial or verbal mimicry – Churchill's habit of pronouncing 'Nazi' with a short 'a' so it rhymes with 'jazzy' – would matter if Oldman didn't capture the precise aura of the old bulldog or show how he dramatically used his posh, reverberant lisp, more forceful than Halifax's and the King's 'r/w' rhotacism, to hammer home a point or get his own way. Churchill's public persona apparently belied his self-doubts, which *Darkest Hour* lays bare in some of Winston's conversations with Clemmie, and his solitariness, which Wright evokes by isolating him in lit rectangles – a lift compartment, a window – in fields of black. Wright also lends metaphorical weight to the notion of Churchill 'walking with destiny' by having him leave his cab to walk toward the Houses of Parliament to make the climactic speech during the second of two rhyming slow-mo left-to-right tracking shots that show ordinary British people going about their business. (These shots test credibility much less than the tube train sequence.) Wright is blessed with a performance that not only anchors his directorial showmanship but also spiritually conveys Britain's need to resist the temptation of a deal with the devil. As Churchill, slamming the table, bellows frustratedly at Halifax, 'When will the lesson be learned? You cannot reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth.'

Is *Darkest Hour* Oldman's finest hour? Underneath the make-up and the Churchillian bombast, there is refinement in the performance, but I wouldn't want to say it is better than his *Tinker Tailor* turn, or those he gave in *The Firm* or *Prick up Your Ears*. It ought to win him the Best Actor Oscar at last, and it ought to show thousands of younger viewers, if they go to see the film, that in 1940 one man's will stood between Britain's security and the Nazi yoke. It's a movie that doubly puts us in the presence of greatness.

Graham Fuller, *Sight and Sound*, January 2018

DARKEST HOUR

Directed by: Joe Wright
©: Focus Features LLC
A Working Title production: Working Title
Presented by: Focus Features, Perfect World Pictures
Executive Producers: James Biddle, Lucas Webb, Liza Chasin
Produced by: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Lisa Bruce, Anthony McCarten, Douglas Urbanski
Associate Producer: Katherine Keating
Unit Production Manager: Jo Wallett
Production Co-ordinator: Oliver Cockerham
Financial Controller: Craig Barwick
Supervising Location Manager: Adam Richards
Location Managers: Ben Mengham, Joseph Cairns, James Buxton
Post-production Supervisor: Tim Grover
Post-production Co-ordinator: Diarmuid Hughes
2nd Unit Director: Thomas Napper
2nd Unit 1st Assistant Directors: Dan Channing Williams, Tom Edmondson
Script Supervisor: Phoebe Billington
Casting by: Jina Jay
Written by: Anthony McCarten
Director of Photography: Bruno Delbonnel
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Carlos de Carvalho
Aerial Director of Photography: Jeremy Braben
Camera Operator: Des Whelan
Gaffer: Chuck Finch
Key Grip: Paul Hymns
Still Photographer: Jack English
Visual Effects by: Framestore
Special Effects Supervisor: Neal Champion
Editor: Valerio Bonelli
1st Assistant Editor: Tommaso Gallone
Production Designer: Sarah Greenwood
Supervising Art Director: Nick Gottschalk
Art Directors: Oliver Goodier, Joe Howard
Set Decorator: Katie Spencer
Graphic Designer: Georgina Millett
Property Master: Dennis Wiseman
Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran
Make-up and Hair Designer: Ivana Primorac
Key Hair & Make-up Artist: Flora Moody
Gary Oldman's Prosthetics, Make-up & Hair by: Kazuhiro Tsuji
Prosthetic Make-up Supervisor to Gary Oldman: David Malinowski
Prosthetic Make-up & Hair Artist to Gary Oldman: Lucy Sibbick
Prosthetics Lab Work, Los Angeles: Vincent Van Dyke Effects
Title Design: Hingston Studio
Music by: Dario Marianelli
Piano: Vikingur Olafsson
Orchestra Leader: Rolf Wilson
Conductor: Dario Marianelli
Orchestration: Dario Marianelli, Geoff Alexander
Sound Designer: Paul Carter
[Production] Sound Mixer: John Casali
Re-recording Mixers: Craig Berkey, Paul Cotterell
Supervising Sound Editors: Craig Berkey, Becki Ponting
Dialogue Editor: Michael Maroussas
ADR Mixer: Mark Appleby
Foley Artist: Barnaby Smyth
Foley Mixer: Keith Partridge
Supervising Foley Editor: Danny Sheehan
Foley Editor: Rob Turner
Stunt Co-ordinator: Jamie Edgell
Historical Consultant: John Lukacs
Historical Adviser: Phil Reed
Mr [Gary] Oldman's Singing Teacher: Michael E. Dean
Dialogue & Dialect Coach: Emma Woodvine, Jamie Matthewman

Cast

Gary Oldman *(Winston Churchill)*
Kristin Scott Thomas *(Clementine Churchill, 'Clemmie')*
Lily James *(Elizabeth Layton)*
Stephen Dillane *(Viscount Halifax)*
Ronald Pickup *(Neville Chamberlain)*
Samuel West *(Sir Anthony Eden)*
Ben Mendelsohn *(King George VI)*
Richard Lumsden *(General Ismay)*
Malcolm Storry *(General Ironside)*
Nicholas Jones *(Sir John Simon)*
David Schofield *(Clement Atlee)*
Hilton McRae *(Arthur Greenwood)*
Benjamin Whitrow *(Sir Samuel Hoare)*
Joe Armstrong *(John Evans)*
Adrian Rawlings *(Air Chief Marshall Dowding)*
David Bamber *(Admiral Ramsay)*
Paul Leonard *(Admiral Dudley Pound)*
David Strathairn *(President Roosevelt)*
Eric MacLennan *(Tom Leonard)*
Philip Martin Brown *(Sawyers)*
Demitri Goritsas *(Cabinet Secretary Bridges)*
Jordan Waller *(Randolph Churchill)*
Alex Clatworthy *(Diana Churchill)*
Mary Antony *(Mary Churchill)*
Bethany Muir *(Sarah Churchill)*
Anna Burnett *(Pamela Churchill)*
Jeremy Child *(Lord Stanhope)*
Brian Pettifer *(Lord Kingsley Wood)*
Michael Gould *(Lord Londonderry)*
Paul Ridley *(House of Commons Speaker)*
Robin Pearce *(Ernle Hastings)*
Michael Bott *(equerry)*
Oliver Broche *(Reynaud)*
Mario Hacquard *(Daladier)*
Pip Torrens *(BBC producer)*
Edmund Wiseman *(actor)*
Hannah Steele *(Abigail Walker)*
Nia Gwynne *(Alice Simpson)*
Ade Haastrup *(Marcus Peters)*
James Eeles *(Maurice Baker)*
Flora Nicholson *(Jessie Sutton)*
Bronte Carmichael *(young girl on Tube)*
Roisin O'Neill *(Agnes Dillon)*
John Locke *(Oliver Wilson)*
Joanna Neary *(Margaret Jerome)*
Richard Glover *(Brigadier Nicholson)*
Tom Ashley *(Ramsay staffer)*
Joshua Higgott *(reporter)*
Imogen King *(teenage girl at Tube map)*
Miles Gallant *(naval map-room officer)*
Faye Marsay *(Sybil)*
John Atterbury *(Sir Alexander Cadogan)*
James Harkness *(A.D. Nicholl, secretary 1)*
Joshua James *(W.D. Wilkinson, secretary 2)*
Charley Palmer Rothwell *(Christopher Wilson, photographer)*
Patsy Ferran *(maid)*
Sarah Flind *(cook)*
Steffan Donnelly *(back bencher)*
Kieran Buckeridge *(Cecil Beaton)*

USA/UK 2017
125 mins

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