



Seniors' Paid Matinee

Queen at Sea

Queen at Sea

Director: Lance Hammer

Production Companies: The Bureau,
Alluvial Film Company

Executive Producer: John J. Hammer

Producers: Tristan Goligher, Lance Hammer

Line Producer: Filiz-Theres Erel

Casting Director: Kahleen Crawford

Written by: Lance Hammer

Cinematographer: Adolpho Veloso

Editor: Lance Hammer

Production Designer: Soraya Gilanni Viljoen

Costume Designer: Saffron Cullane

Hair and Make Up Designer: Nicole Stafford

Music Supervisor: Connie Farr

Sound Editor: Kent Sparling

Cast:

Juliette Binoche (*Amanda*)

Anna Calder-Marshall (*Leslie*)

Tom Courtenay (*Martin*)

Florence Hunt (*Sara*)

UK-USA 2026

121 mins

Digital

A Curzon release

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It's not a theme to make audiences comfortable – nor filmmakers, nor actors. It takes seriousness, and nerves of steel, to attempt substantial dramas about old age and infirmity, especially about dementia, topics that cinema generally shies away from – as most of us do in real life, until they directly affect our own experience. But in recent years, we've seen a handful of striking cinematic treatments of the theme: François Ozon's euthanasia drama *Everything Went Fine* (2021); Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012), about the decline of an octogenarian couple; Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020), which used stylised shifts of space and time to take us into the mind of a man with Alzheimer's; Gaspar Noé's formally daring *Vortex* (2021), which used a split screen to evoke the barrier in communication that dementia introduces.

Now we can add Lance Hammer's *Queen at Sea* – a sobering, uncompromising film, but also an intensely moving one, superbly executed and acted with empathy and depth. That's down to the nerve and control of an American director who is something of a mysterious quantity at this stage in his career – his one previous feature, *Ballast*, dates back to 2008 – and down to a superb cast headed by Juliette Binoche and the veteran duo of Tom Courtenay and Anna Calder-Marshall.

Written, directed and edited by Hammer, also one of its producers, *Queen at Sea* is set in north London (it's hard to think when Tufnell Park last had so much screen time). Binoche plays Amanda, an academic based in Newcastle who has relocated to London with her teenage daughter to work on a book and to be near her mother Leslie (Calder-Marshall). Leslie has advanced dementia and lives in a house with her second husband Martin (Courtenay), who is also her caregiver. One morning Amanda interrupts the couple in bed, having sex. It's more than an awkward moment – it's a flashpoint of moral crisis. Martin has been told he must not have sex with Leslie, even if she initiates, because her condition makes her incapable of communicating consent with full awareness. Amanda calls the police; the situation escalates, officialdom intervening, leaving Martin frustrated and humiliated, Leslie increasingly confused and upset, and Amanda agonised over whether she has done the right thing.

Speaking from his home in Los Angeles, Hammer tells me that *Queen at Sea* did not arise from any personal experience with dementia, but was sparked by stories heard from people he knew. The subject came to fascinate him and he wrote the initial script very quickly – despite feeling some resistance. 'I thought, I don't want to make a film about the elderly and dementia. But the moral dilemma at the core of it really intrigued me, because I couldn't make up my mind what I thought about it. I was so ambivalent about the morality. It brought up so many other questions about love, agency, consent – but particularly about the nature of love, and when does love require memory?'

That's one of the crucial aspects of *Queen at Sea*: the question of what love means to someone who may not remember their nearest and dearest, as well as those people's feelings in relation to a loved one who seems no longer to be who they once were. What does a life shared mean when the memory of that life has been erased, or only subsists in fragments?

Martin is convinced that his years with Leslie allow him to read her feelings, even if she can't always communicate them – a stance that, problematic as it is, Courtenay explores with great subtlety. 'Martin's approach,' Hammer says, 'is that on a sublingual level, there's a communication that still exists, that's been established over 18 years of their marriage, and he's going on that. He knows Leslie – he can intuitively understand what her needs are, what she desires, when she feels fear.'

Big Screen Classics

Piccadilly

Tue 1 Sep 20:40; Sat 12 Sep 12:10

Cabin in the Sky

Wed 2 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by musicologist and cultural historian Dr Hannah Robbins);
Sun 6 Sep 12:00

Night and the City

Thu 3 Sep 15:30; Mon 7 Sep 20:30;
Sun 20 Sep 12:00

The Roaring Twenties

Fri 4 Sep 20:50; Sun 27 Sep 12:00

The Blue Angel Der blaue Engel

Sat 5 Sep 12:00; Mon 14 Sep 14:40;
Tue 29 Sep 20:55

Victims of Sin Víctimas del pecado

Tue 8 Sep 20:40; Mon 21 Sep 14:30;
Sun 4 Oct 12:00

Cruising

Wed 9 Sep 20:30 (+ intro); Sat 19 Sep 20:50

Cabaret

Thu 10 Sep 20:40; Sat 3 Oct 15:00

Dance, Girl, Dance

Sun 13 Sep 18:10; Thu 17 Sep 20:50

Belly

Tue 15 Sep 20:40; Wed 30 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by heritage and music professional Naz Hamdi)

Saturday Night Fever

Wed 16 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme Development Manager);
Sat 26 Sep 20:40

Eden

Fri 18 Sep 20:20; Mon 28 Sep 18:05

Funeral Parade of Roses

Tue 22 Sep 20:50; Thu 1 Oct 18:10

Paris Is Burning

Wed 23 Sep 18:20 (+ intro by Tahliah Simumba, artist and BFI Inclusion Partner); Tue 6 Oct 20:40

Shame

Thu 24 Sep 20:50; Mon 5 Oct 18:20

The Last Days of Disco

Fri 25 Sep 20:40; Fri 2 Oct 20:40

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‘And that probably is true – but it’s so unprovable. That is the safest way to communicate with somebody at this stage, in my opinion. But it comes at high stakes, because if you’re wrong, you can really harm them.’ As for the institutions that step in to protect people in Leslie’s situation, ‘they are very well meaning, but they have no knowledge of the person. They can’t read those intuitive cues. So I don’t know; there are no answers here.’

Queen at Sea examines such questions with informed nuance, thanks to the research that underpins the film. British social and medical care professionals contributed their knowledge and some also appear on screen, essentially playing themselves, which brings a compelling naturalistic underpinning to the drama.

The film contains a substantial amount of overt discussion about social and medical procedure as well as family relations. But the irony is that everything revolves around a character who barely speaks, and sometimes seems barely to communicate. *Queen at Sea* makes us aware of how an old person no longer speaking can be seen too easily as a body, even an object – and Calder-Marshall plays on that to unsettling effect. Her performance is facial and physical, her large eyes expressing surprise, anxiety, uncertainty, but also love. In one street scene, Leslie gives a brief glance at Martin, its exact meaning hard to pin down, and yet – in my interpretation at least – we instantly sense, in ways beyond words, that her need and trust of him are absolute.

Originally set in New York, the drama was transplanted to London because Hammer absolutely wanted to work with Courtenay. In 2015, the actor excelled in a film that took a different approach to the question of ageing, memory and shared life experience, Andrew Haigh’s *45 Years* (2015). But Hammer already knew him from his 1960s films – *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *Billy Liar* (1963), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) – as well as 1983’s *The Dresser*. ‘For many, many years, I’ve loved him – his presence, his tenderness.’

It was Courtenay who pointed Hammer in the direction of Anna Calder-Marshall, whose screen and stage career spans more than 50 years, and who has been a friend ever since they played Hamlet and Ophelia in a 1968 stage production. ‘There’s just this great, beautiful, harmonious energy between Tom and Annie that they’ve always had, this platonic love, and they brought that to the film,’ says the director. Courtenay and Hammer visited the actress at her home – a sort of audition/improv session, with Courtenay very much holding out for her in the role. There, Hammer discovered that she was an accomplished painter, and that fed significantly into the film. While she has lost her relationship with words, Leslie appears her fullest self when able to paint and draw (the work seen in the film is Calder-Marshall’s own, and it’s impressive).

She also did significant research. ‘I never even asked her,’ Hammer says, ‘but she went to some care homes that had memory units, around Kent, where she lives. I’ll never really know how much she got from that but I think it was a lot. She told me it was very important for her to observe how, in a nonverbal way, [residents] communicated with people.’

You imagine it takes considerable delicacy and nerve to ask older actors to play parts in which they perform their own mortality and vulnerability in a deeply exposing way – with scenes here (as for Emmanuelle Riva in *Amour*) that could be considered as compromising their physical dignity. Hammer approached the challenge circumspectly. ‘The conversations with Annie were, “Before you say yes to this part, we should talk about it – there are some undignified moments. It takes bravery. You’re going to go into a role that’s not you; it’s brutal.” And she was energised by that, because it’s an opportunity to achieve real true art. Tom, Annie, Juliette, they’re *art beasts* – there’s such a commitment to the art.’

Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, October 2026