

The Main Feature



Season 35 - Issue 3 (screening 9.10.14)

USA 2013
Cert 15 118 minutes

Director: Steven Soderbergh
Screenplay: Richard LaGravenese based on the book by Scott Thorson
Cinematography: Peter Andrews (aka Soderbergh)
Music: Marvin Hamlisch
Editor: Mary Ann Bernard (aka Soderbergh)

Cast

Michael Douglas	Liberace
Matt Damon	Scot Thorsen
Debbie Reynolds	Frances Liberace
Rob Lowe	Dr Jack Startz
Dan Ackroyd	Seymour Heller
Scott Bakula	Bob Black

The flamboyant American pianist and entertainer Liberace died in 1987 aged 67. Today, most people in Britain under 40 would have little more than a hazy idea of who he was, or the extent of his fame. From the vantage point of today, it's hard to explain the sheer magnitude of his celebrity or to account for his success.

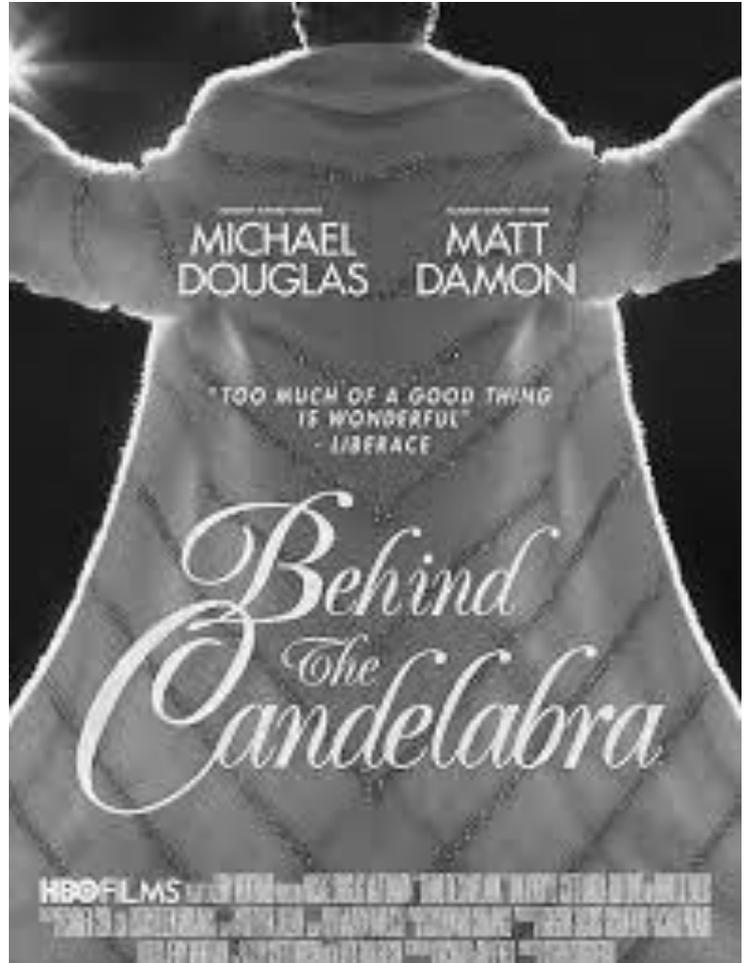
For the young amongst us who may not have heard of Liberace, one reviewer described him as "think Elton John crossed with Alan Carr... only camper".

Yet in his four-decade heyday he was a household name (pronounced, as everyone knew back then, 'Libber-AH-chef')

His fame – outside America, at least – was almost totally dependent on his television and live shows. He recorded albums of piano music, but they are rarely heard today on radio. He never had a Top 20 single in Britain. In the 1950s he tried film acting, but thought better of it after starring in the flop *Sincerely Yours*, playing a pianist stricken by deafness.

But it was television that made him a millionaire *matinée* idol. The *Liberace Show*, which first aired in 1952, drew more than 30 million viewers, mostly women, and he received 10,000 fan letters a week. His first two years' earnings from television totalled \$7 million. From then on he was the world's highest paid entertainer, with his weekly earnings outstripping Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland, all of whom now live on in much more vividly in our collective memory. For example, throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, his live shows were major box office attractions at the Las Vegas where he would earn \$300,000 a week.

Liberace was born Wladziu Valentino Liberace in 1919, the third of four children in a Catholic family. He was raised in a working-class suburb of Milwaukee, where money was scarce. His Italian father Salvatore was a jobbing musician and when Liberace was only four, he started picking out tunes on the family piano. It was clear he was a prodigy.



As he entered his teens, the talented young pianist was leading a double life, practicing études and sonatas with his music teacher, but playing pop tunes and boogie-woogie with a four-piece band in beer halls and roadhouses by night — a means of supplementing his family’s meagre income. But he felt he fell just short of what it took to be a concert pianist; in contrast, he loved the reaction he could elicit from audiences with his versatile playing and breezy patter. So he decided to become Mr. Showmanship.

He called his music “pop with a bit of classics”, and played it on a grand piano, complete with candelabra - an idea stolen from the 1944 Chopin biopic *A Song to Remember*, starring Cornel Wilde and Merle Oberon. He played only the most melodic best-known passages from pieces by such composers as Rachmaninov, Liszt and Grieg — “Readers Digest versions,” as critics complained. His pop offerings ranged from warm, sentimental tunes (‘I’ll be Seeing You’, ‘As Time Goes By’) to a bit of boogie-woogie.

But the music wasn’t the half of it. Between playing, he chatted at length to his audience; middle-aged matrons were his most fervent constituency, and he wooed them assiduously, telling them how great they looked and how much he loved them. A round-faced man with wavy hair and a cheesy smile, he said all this in tones of eager sincerity. He also invariably mentioned how much he loved his mother; and if she was there at a concert, he always blew her a kiss.



He often insisted: “I don’t give concerts. I put on a show.” That he certainly did. His appearances were monuments to gaudy excess, though he light-heartedly joked and winked about his sequin-drenched outfits, his furs and jewellery. In one routine, he arrived on stage in a mirrored Rolls-Royce, driven by a handsome young man in a white chauffeur’s outfit, complete with peaked cap. Liberace might typically be draped in a \$300,000 virgin fox-fur cape with a 16-foot train. When he decided to discard the cape, a miniature Rolls appeared on stage to transport it off.

He did all he could to justify his self-imposed nickname “Mr. Showmanship.”

The Liberace story could easily have been turned into a campfest, full of superficiality and razzle-dazzle. Instead, both Soderbergh and Douglas were interested in something they both value greatly: a kind of professionalism and sense of commitment that represents the best of Hollywood.

“Liberace worked hard,” Douglas said, “When Scott Thorson became a drug addict and Liberace’s work was imperiled, their relationship cratered. When I watch the movie, I forget its Matt and me pretty quickly. And soon after that, I forget it’s two guys. The fights, the love—it’s a couple. There’s always that moment in a relationship where somebody has gone too far or they’ve done something that can’t be forgotten, and, suddenly, a little tendon is popped, and it never comes back. The only people you can forgive after something like that is your family. Lee tried, but he couldn’t forgive Scott until he was about to die.”

“I wanted to make something really intimate,” Soderbergh said. “I liked the *Sunset Boulevard* aspect of Lee and Scott—older, younger; powerful, not powerful. With some show business thrown into it. During his career, Liberace was the most successful act to play Vegas—he made up to \$400,000 a week during the seventies—but he was very private. The film is about a part of his life that he didn’t share with anyone; it is an act of imagination, but I wanted it to be sincere. I didn’t want it to be unkind, because everyone loved Liberace. He was the nicest man.”

Soderbergh is known to be a very hands on director, and this was another film where he was both the cameraman and editor, although the credits show those roles to have been fulfilled by Peter Andrews and Mary Ann Bernard.

Michael hired piano teachers, and watched hours of performance footage to perfect his hand and body movements. Of course, no actor could ever fully replicate Liberace’s musical genius, so for some of the

scenes featuring the more complicated musical numbers, which Liberace often played on his opulent Mirror Chandler Baldwin Grand Piano, Michael's face was even digitally superimposed on to a pianist's body.

Michael did meet Liberace, who was a neighbour of his father, Kirk Douglas, in Palm Springs. 'I remember meeting him just in passing, in his convertible with the top down – his hair not moving,' he told Entertainment Weekly. "But what I mostly remember is Lee's TV show. Liberace talked directly to the camera—he was the first person to do that. He was having such a good time that he was contagious. For me, Lee's gayness didn't even enter the picture—you just wanted to share the good time with him. And he was nice. I was attracted to his sheer likability." He also got some advice from his co-star Debbie Reynolds, who was a friend of Liberace and plays the role of his mother in the film. 'She just told me, your voice can never be too nasal,' he revealed.

"One of the things I enjoyed about this part was, I got to smile. I don't smile a lot in my pictures. I'm always so grim. My career has been more in the grey, if not the dark area. Playing Liberace was so much fun! You put on this mask and it allows you to do anything you want. I don't get to do that very often. My movies are usually about stripping off the make-up, getting down to the skeleton."

He admits he had initial nerves about stepping into the showman's shoes. "This is the first time I played a character that people knew. I had a lot of trepidation."



Douglas's physical transformation into Liberace, who underwent cosmetic surgery throughout the years, has been highly commended too. "Lee was broad-chested. One of his thighs is the same size as two of mine, so I was a little put off in terms of the physicality aspect. We were really blessed with talented people [on set]. In this high-definition age, hair and make-up always makes me very nervous. We were freaked out the first time we saw the masks that they used for the surgery."

He has compliments for co-star Damon: "I was in awe of Matt's courage. It's one thing for me at my age to stretch a little bit and try different characters. But a man in the prime of his career going this route? Plus, he has to wear a white sequinned thong! That takes real guts." Their love scenes didn't pose an issue, either. "Knowing Matt already, you never have to go through that formal dance of introductions," he says.

Although it was only a few decades ago, *Behind the Candelabra* takes place in another world, a place where being openly gay and famous was viewed as an impossibility. However director Steven Soderbergh provoked a fierce debate when he said he had to take the film to the cable station HBO because Hollywood's studios believed it was "too gay".

"Everybody loved the script [by Richard LaGravenese, based on Scott Thorson's memoir of his life with Liberace]," said Jerry Weintraub, the veteran producer who worked with Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra and knew Liberace. "The party line was that *Behind the Candelabra* would not appeal to anyone who is not gay. Interestingly, they forgot that Liberace's own audience in the fifties and sixties was not gay. It was purple-haired ladies who loved his act—he knew how to take the audience upside down, sideways, and backward. He was an artist, and yet, when I saw him at his house, he was free and open with his sexuality. There were men in every room! I didn't care—it just meant there were more women for me!"

Against the wishes of his estate, the Riverside County coroner ordered an official autopsy and determined that Liberace had died of an AIDS-related illness, making him the second major celebrity after Rock Hudson to officially succumb to the illness during the early days of media frenzy surrounding the disease

When the film premiered at Cannes, Scott Thorson, now 54 and suffering from cancer, was nowhere to be seen. He is serving a prison sentence in Reno for credit card theft.

Iain McGlashan

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Reactions on 25.9.14 to: **A Royal Affair**

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	~	~	~	3	7	19	3	1

Total received – 33

Average Score – 7.76

Your Comments

Excellent film – moving and absorbing. Very well produced and acted. Moving
A powerful story of court life – well acted An excellent choice for the Film club
A fascinating and well acted film Great period drama. Tragic history
Interesting bit of history : too slow for me Well made but a bit too long
A very powerful film, beautifully directed and acted So tragic, what a sad ending
Wonderful film – some things never change! A very moving film
Excellent portrayal of intrigue and political deception Excellent
Like a fairy tale, maybe a “Grimm” story. Very well done, photography excellent
Visually stunning, atmospheric, understated, subtle acting – apart from the king of
course who is suitably overstated.
Excellent. A period of European history of which I knew nothing. Most interesting.

Our next film: Thursday 23 October

Showing as part of



One of the first features shot in Saudi Arabia, and certainly the first to be written and directed by a woman, this is a warmly emotional and gently provocative coming-of-age drama with a terrific central performance from young first-timer Waad Mohammed.

“Unmissable and one of the best films of the year.”