

Sharp & witty talent

Nushin Elahi reviews a glittering production about the weekly meetings between the queen and her prime ministers which took London by storm and is being screened at local cinemas now

ONCE a week in the late afternoon, for the past 60 years, the British prime minister has reported to Buckingham Palace for an audience with the Queen Elizabeth in an unbroken line stretching from Winston Churchill to David Cameron. What they say is never reported, not even to their spouses.

This is the intriguing premise of Peter Morgan's play *The Audience*, which opened in London's West End to instant success. Reprising the regal role for which she had such acclaim in Morgan's film of the crisis the monarchy faced at the time of Diana's death, is Dame Helen Mirren.

Starring a host of English actors alongside Mirren, *The Audience* is a rare showcase of great British talent. Essentially it is a two-hander, although one of the characters is constantly changing, but this lends itself well to being filmed as one of the NT Live productions. And one doesn't have to be a monarchist to admire the writing and performing.

The play doesn't take a chronological approach, which makes it much more of a challenge for Mirren. In stunning sleight-of-hand she transforms from a grey-tufted ma'am to a sprightly new queen, facing the formidably gruff presence of Winston Churchill, in a lovely cameo by Edward Fox. The years jump back and forth with polished ease, as they troop past – a kaleidoscope of men, and one rather shrill woman, presenting her with deference, arrogance, intrigue and occasionally, support. Some she likes and others she doesn't, but all are treated with impeccable respect.

The writing is sharp and witty, and the queen comes across as a thoughtful and pragmatic person. In the opening conversation with a gormless yet endearing John Ma-



John Major (Paul Ritter) and Helen Mirren as the Queen in *The Audience*

jor, she admits to her own lack of formal education with the wry comment: "What fine hands the country is in!" When Maggie Thatcher arrives on the warpath, a beautifully constructed scene contrasts the manner in which the two women handle conflict. The subject, interestingly, is whether or not to back sanctions on South Africa. The Queen's disapproval of Thatcher's stance on sanctions had just hit the Sunday headlines. Opposite Anthony Eden her younger self is aghast as she probes insistently into the intricacies and moral issues of what would become the Suez crisis.

Directed by Stephen Daldry, the production exploits every possible opportunity to break from the static interview two-hander, and

some of the finer moments include breaking off a photo-shoot with Cecil Beaton to talk to Eden, providing the opportunity of presenting the queen in ball-gown regalia, and the preamble to the summer picnic that Harold Wilson endures one "fine summer evening" when the rain is lashing down at Balmoral. The corgis that scamper across the stage are not, to my mind, worth it, but at least they don't upstage the entire scene.

Morgan's writing skilfully reveals the character and constancy of the queen as he sets her against eight of her dozen prime ministers, each individual sharply differentiated and all beautifully brought to life by this cast.

There is one, however, that sticks in the mind, and perhaps



Helen Mirren as the Queen, Mirren is helped too by the creation of her 11-year-old girlhood self (a promising Nell Williams) in *The Audience*

thanks to the unpromising start he has with his ruler: Richard McCabe's Harold Wilson is a sheer delight, from his abrasive beginnings, when he insists on a photo of their meeting for the missus, to the poignant moment of his retirement when they have become the unlikely of friends. McCabe portrays a man full of bluster, so proud of the hardship of his youth that even his compliments "come through the tradesman's entrance", and offsets the royal serenity with aplomb.

It is Mirren, though, that must take all the accolades, in a nuanced role that reveals a feisty and indomitable spirit, with a remarkable ability to strip away the pomp and ceremony and reveal the simple woman at heart. The actress may have all the assistance of props and

costumes, but in the hands of a lesser talent, the entire production could have failed. Mirren is helped too by the creation of her 11-year-old girlhood self (a promising Nell Williams), with whom she can reveal the secrets of her "unlived life" and confess a ruler's private moments. The vocal changes, the observance of age, the way she handles each PM differently and her impeccable comic timing, show Mirren as an actress at the height of her talent.

This is a regal treat of such glittering circumstance it shouldn't be missed – enough to convert even a hardened republican.

Screenings at Cinema Nouveau nationally today and Wednesday and Thursday (August 7 and 8).

A rock 'em and sock 'em sci-fi spectacle with heart

ANN HORNADAY,

PACIFIC RIM is a big, lumbering, rock 'em, sock 'em mash-up of metallic heft and hyperbole, a noisy, overproduced disaster flick that sucks its characters and the audience down a vortex of garish visual effects and risibly cartoonish action.

And you know what? It's not bad. Leave it to Guillermo del Toro – that overgrown fanboy with a heart of gold and a mind of impressive philosophical complexity – to bring some sense and sensibility to this year's crop of dumb spectacles. *Pacific Rim* will never qualify as part of the director's high-end oeuvre – *Pan's Labyrinth* it most decidedly ain't. But as an example of Del Toro's abiding love for comic books, pop culture and movie genre excess, it ranks with his less intellectual but equally imaginative efforts, maybe

somewhere between *Blade II* and the gloriously bodacious *Hellboy*.

In fact, *Hellboy's* mordant star, Ron Perlman, shows up for a cameo in *Pacific Rim*, not sheathed in red leathery skin but his own, as a black marketer working Hong Kong's neon-noir byways. It's in that port city, sometime in the future, that an apocalyptic invasion of sea creatures called Kaiju will or won't be repelled by a ragtag army of Jaegers, 25-storey robots that look like super-size versions of Robert Downey jr's Iron Man, right down to the whirring mechanical hearts that glow in their tungsten-clad chests.

Iron Man isn't the only movie *Pacific Rim* conjures in the course of its overlong running time. The central stand-off between fantastical creatures bears echoes of *Mothra vs Godzilla*, as well as the anime classics that Del Toro has cited as



Mako (Rinko Kikuchi), in *Pacific Rim* – man-robots vs aliens in spectacle of all-out destruction.

inspirations. The visual design recalls *TRON*, some plot elements recall *Inception*, the crunching action recalls *Transformers* and the relationships recall *Top Gun*, wherein a group of cocky flyboys try to one-up

each other in the name of saving the world.

At least that's the initial vibe of *Pacific Rim*, which begins as brothers Yancy (Diego Klattenhoff) and Raleigh (Charlie Hunnam) suit up to inhabit their Jaeger, which is powered by two people who meld minds in order to create a unified consciousness, the better to smoothly manipulate their giant armoured sheath and dispatch the voracious Kaiju.

But what begins as just another boys-and-their-toys smash-and-gab turns into something more, as Del Toro expands the Jaeger universe into something far more balanced, even nuanced. The fantastic English actor Idris Elba gives *Pacific Rim* sex appeal and gravitas as the Jaegers' commander, Stacker Pentecost, a titanic force and physical specimen himself. When Raleigh meets an

ambitious, Jaeger pilot trainee named Mako (Rinko Kikuchi), *Pacific Rim* promises to introduce some welcome gender balance to the world of end-of-the-world heroics.

And Del Toro, ever mindful of the exigencies of the genre, never succumbs to the humourlessness and over-plotting that has dragged down so many of his contemporaries this season: He keeps *Pacific Rim* firmly focused on its utterly absurd raison d'être (Kill those Kaiju once and for all! You're welcome, Hong Kong!). But he makes sure to leaven that mission with moments of humour, most often at the hands of two goofy Jaeger research scientists, played by the charmingly hapless Charlie Day and Burn Gorman, who proves the rare performer capable of channelling Jerry Lewis and Roddy McDowall simultaneously. – The Washington Post