

The Lost King (2023)



Our heroine reads up on
King Richard III.
IFC Films

That truth is sometimes more bizarre than fiction is well demonstrated in Director Stephen Frears latest film, a historical detective story. One of its features that I loved is that its heroine Philippa Langley, a middle-class office worker and mother in Edenborough, is as under-rated by her peers as the TV Detective Columbo. When she turns amateur historian, she is put down by academics who regard “amateur” as meaning wooly-headed or incompetent. The filmmakers add a touch of fantasy to the true story by adding the ghost of King Richard, who follows Philippa around, day and night, and with whom she converses.

The film begins by showing that Philippa, ably played by Sally Hawkins, as being passed over for a promotion at the sales office where she works. She talks to her boss, protesting that her chronic fatigue syndrome has not affected her work. She is separated from ex-husband John Langley (Steve Coogan), the pair parenting two lively middle school sons, Raife (Benjamin Scanlan) and Max (Adam Robb). Her interest in King Richard begins with her and a son’s attendance at a local production of Shakespeare’s play “King Richard III. She does not like the way he is being portrayed—as an evil man with a hunchback, responsible for the murder of two princes who stood between him and the British throne. Perhaps her own experience at her

workplace makes her sympathetic to the man and desiring to defend him against calumny, even be it supported by Shakespeare.

Later that night she “sees” Richard (Harry Lloyd) dressed in his golden crown and long purple robe. Indeed, after that, wherever she goes, there is Richard III. Is he stalking her? She buys a stack of books about the king at a bookstore; reads them all; finds a calling card of the “King Richard III Society;” journeys there to attend one of its meetings; and promptly joins, thus entering a struggle against the experts who “know better.”

She agrees with the Ricardians that Shakespeare’s view of the King as a black-hearted murderer is wrong after she reads a medieval account of his death that is favorable to him, it not mentioning the murder of his two nephews. It is in the chronicles written by his enemies that he is painted as such an evil villain. The Ricardians believe that his body was buried in an old Greyfriars abbey in Leicester, rather than his having been dumped into a river after being killed at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485.

However, the Richard III Society and its publication are regarded with disdain by the academics. When she questions a professor lecturing on the King, he holds her up to ridicule when she admits she has no academic credentials. “It’s easier to find a needle in a haystack,” another scholar warns her. She does come upon archaeologist Richard Buckley ((Mark Addy), who, though at first disregarding her, eventually accepts her views. However, he is soon dismissed by the University of Leicester where he had taught. After she brings him a medieval street map of Leicester that shows the Abbey and they lay it over a modern map, she travels to the city to find the spot.

The Abbey is now covered over by a parking lot. She is taken aback that the likely spot is marked by a large painted “R.” Wow! But when she asks the attendant, he says it stands for

“Reserved.” Convinced that this is a sign of the burial place of Richard III, she must clear the hurdle of the city government, as well as raise the money—\$36,000—for the excavation. The authorities at Leicester University have already blown her off, though at the last minute, when she has secured digging permission and crowd-sourced the money, they do lend their name and a small fund to the effort—and, she discovers, begin to crowd her out of the credit. What a thrill to see how all this is resolved—and I have not even mentioned her troubles with her ex-husband and sons from whom at first she had kept her obsessive search a secret.

I wish the heroine’s motives for giving up her job to go on her quest could have been articulated better: why does it matter to her that this king whose reign spanned just two years deserves her sacrifice? And the addition of a ghost to the story adds a touch of whimsy, but the interchanges, when the King eventually responds to her, surely could have been more lively.

Philippa proves to be as tenacious as the widow seeking justice from the crooked judge in Jesus’ parable. Also, as the author of Ecclesiastes has observed, she discovers the necessity of companionship. There are times when she is worn down and ready to quit, but the members of the Richard III Society support and encourage her each step of the way.

The film provides a very interesting look at how “history” is arrived at, how it is written—and sometimes miswritten. All the evidence that this brave and persistent woman uncovered existed at the time—the various ancient chronicles and the map—it just needed someone to bring them all together and figure out the truth. Credentials are useless, even getting in the way, unless a person has the curiosity, the drive, and a devotion to truth, rather than to dogma. The world will always need people like Philippa Langley to shake us out of thralldom to accepted truth (reduced to dogma) rather than facts.

Note: Frear's film has stirred considerable controversy in Great Britain due to the film's emphasis upon the villainy of the University of Leicester and to a lesser extent of archaeologist Richard Buckley. Here is a link to one of those reviews you might want to read if, like myself, you are often curious about the truth of those films claiming to be "based on a true story"—[The Guardian](#).

This review will be in the April issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.