

# W. E.

**An IM Global / Reliance Entertainment Company / Semtex Films Presentation  
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Directed by Madonna**

**A film review by Franco P. Visser**

The year 1936 will forever be known as the year of the three kings. King George V died in January 1936 after a long illness at his country estate Sandringham with, amongst others, his wife Queen Mary, his sons Edward, Prince of Wales, and Albert, Duke of York, by his bedside. Upon King George V's demise, he was succeeded by his son Edward who chose to style himself as King Edward VIII. Edward would not reign a full year, for he abdicated on 11 December 1936 in favour of his brother Albert, for as he declared in his abdication broadcast "...I could not discharge my duties as King as I would like to do without the help and support of the woman I love..." Edward's abdication was

one of the biggest constitutional crises of the 20th century that England had to face, and his relations with Wallis Warfield Simpson, a twice divorced American lady, ultimately became the love story of the 20th century and will indeed go down in history as one of the biggest love stories of all time.

The film *W. E.* portrays these historical events intertwined with the story of Wally Winthrop (played by Abbie Cornish) set in contemporary New York. She is caught-up in an abusive marriage with her psychiatrist-husband William (played by Richard Coyle) while desperately longing to fall pregnant and have children, albeit against her husband's wishes. An ex-employee of Sotheby's, Wally finds herself drawn to the story of Wallis and Edward, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor as they came to be known following Edward's abdication, when the estate of the Duke and Duchess came up for auction at Sotheby's in 1998. Wally soon becomes obsessed with Wallis the Duchess, and she visits the Sotheby's showrooms every evening to view the estate contents up for sale. It is during one of her frequent viewing trips to the auction House that she meets Evgeni (played by Oscar Isaac), a security guard employed at Sotheby's. He immediately falls in love with her and starts to court her during her visits to the showrooms at night. Wally is torn in two, as she starts to develop feelings for Evgeni while at the same time staying faithful to her abusive and absent husband.

Following Edward's abdication on 11 December 1936, he and Wallis left for France that same evening. There Edward, as Duke of Windsor, received a military posting at a British Military Mission. As Adolf Hitler rose to power, and following the outbreak of World War II, Edward and Wallis were relocated to the Bahamas, where Edward took up the position of the Governor of the Bahamas on behalf of the Crown and the British Government. These were not happy years for Edward and Wallis, and their relocation there was in part due to rumours that they had Nazi sympathies in addition to Hitler



planning on re-installing Edward as King should he successfully invade Britain. Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth, later known as the Queen Mother, were not to stand for these rumours, and both were key players in Edward and Wallis' banishment from Court and the United Kingdom. Queen Elizabeth blamed Edward for the stress and subsequent ill health that her husband Albert, who styled himself as King George VI, suffered, and she never forgave either Edward or Wallis for the abdication. Hitler once described Queen Elizabeth as "the most dangerous woman in Europe", and it would seem for good reason too! Interestingly, was it not for Edward's abdication, Queen Elizabeth II, the current Sovereign of the United Kingdom, would not have become Queen.

Following World War II the Duke and Duchess of Windsor returned to France to live out their exile in relative style and luxury in the Villa Windsor, a mansion set in the Bois de Boulogne district of Paris. The current owner of the Villa Windsor is Mohamed Al-Fayed, the infamous Egyptian multi-millionaire, and it was to this house that Diana, Princess of Wales and Mohamed's son Dodi, paid a visit on the afternoon before their deaths on 31 August 1997. The irony is noteworthy to say the least.

Wally learns that Mohamed Al-Fayed (played by Haluk Bilginer in the film) has in his possession several letters written by Wallis personally. She travels to Paris and meets with Mr. Al-Fayed in order to persuade him to let her read the contents of Wallis' letters. Initially rather reluctant, Al-Fayed agrees and he deliver the letters for her viewing one afternoon to the Villa Windsor. It is in these opulent, yet empty surroundings that Wally reads Wallis' letters, which give the viewer insight into the mental anguish and heartache that she suffered while being caught-up in the love story of the century. The similarities between Wally and Wallis portrayed in the film are also striking, and in the end one of them succeeded in escaping her circumstances, the other one fortunately or unfortunately did not.

*W.E.* is a brilliantly made film with equally brilliant actors cast in the various roles. It is evident that the producers went to great lengths to ensure the exactness of the film with regards to especially the sets and props, so much so that it would seem that some of the jewellery worn by Wallis' character in the film *W. E.* were the actual pieces that formed part of a legendary collection of jewels that once belonged to the Duchess of Windsor. Not being a personal fan of Madonna myself, I have to take my hat off to her for this piece of cinematography. *W. E.* is a must-see film if you have not viewed it yet. It gets a full and deserved 10 out of 10 from me.