



BALIBO

The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth? 'Inspired by a True Story'



From biopics to historical dramas, films based on actual events seem to fill our screens. But how accurate are these stories – and does it even matter? BRIAN MCFARLANE ponders where reality ends and invention begins.

Whenever I read the phrase ‘inspired by a true story’, I find I’m ready to give the filmmakers the benefit of the doubt about their having been ‘inspired’, and even to accept that some of the events of the plot may be ‘true’, in the sense of similar events having happened and been recorded in actual life. That may make me sound liberal-minded in my approach, but what I really stumble over is the word ‘story’.

‘Story’, in my view, conjures up concepts such as structure – often implying a beginning, a middle and an end – though as Jean-Luc Godard famously said, ‘not necessarily in that order’. And even that freewheeling *nouvelle vague* radicalism doesn’t avoid the word ‘order’. The notion of order brings with it the sort of structuring that is interested in providing a *shape* to the narrative: a shape that may involve using parallelism to suggest similarities or contrasts, a pattern of carefully organised cause and effect, a defining tone which will derive from some of the preceding matters, and a narrational ‘voice’. Film, like much novelistic fiction, will have its voice, even if it makes itself heard in different ways.

What is ‘true’?

What about ‘true’? What does it mean in the present context? Presumably it is intended to suggest that some of the facts of the film’s narratives – whether of event or character – had their sources in real-life events and characters. Five journalists *were* shot in East Timor, and in the film *Balibo* (Robert Connolly, 2009), five characters meet their end in this way. Tony Blair *did* have crucial meetings with Bill Clinton and later, one is sorry to add, with George Bush (the 2010 Richard Loncraine film, *The Special Relationship*, seems sorry too). There *was* a strike at the Ford Dagenham factory in 1968, just as Nigel Cole’s 2010 film *Made in Dagenham* makes clear. Lionel Logue *did* help George VI to overcome his speech impediment, as *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010) shows us.

But in relation to all of these, and to countless other films with their roots in the actual world of people and politics, where does ‘true’ begin and end? I’ve deliberately introduced four very recent films to make the point that this is an issue that persists in our film-going experience. How much do we – should we – care about whether or not the film is playing fast and loose with the ‘facts’ as we know them? Does it matter to us whether ‘true’ is no more than a vague acknowledgement of a historical phenomenon? Are filmmakers entirely at liberty to use what they want of the ‘true’, and to elaborate and/or suppress at will in the interests of drama?

Perhaps a statement such as ‘suggested by actual events’ would give a more accurate impression of what is going on. It would avoid the false emphasis of ‘story’ in which we (rightly) assume that there is a narrative purpose to whatever is included, and that ‘unimportant’ matters between the major ‘actual events’ will have been edited out. In this matter I am reminded of what the director Michael James Rowland said about a journalist

who wrote about how you can deprive people of their humanity by denying their banal characteristics, by always describing them in a



THE KING'S SPEECH

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heightened dramatic sense, as victims or fighters or whatever. If you deny people their everydayness, you deny them the full spectrum of their humanity.¹

What I am suggesting is that in real life the individuating moments in 'actual events' can be just as readily located in the banalities as in the major action, and that not many filmmakers examine such moments, which are revealing for their own sake even if they don't promote the forward march of narrative causation. So, something a little more tentative in ascribing sources might be less problematic.

In the news

Two very recent items have led me to speculate on the based-on-a-true-story syndrome. *The King's Speech* I've already referred to, and have pursued at greater length elsewhere.² I was unsettled by just having read the memoir about Lionel Logue written by his grandson and Peter Conradi, which drew heavily on Logue's diaries and revealed a very different figure from that presented by Geoffrey Rush in the film. I'll return to this.

The other item derived from the obituaries for Agathe, eldest of the Von Trapp siblings, who recently died at the age of 97. Her reactions to how her family, particularly her father, and the children's governess were depicted in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1964) were mentioned in numerous obituaries.

As one typical obituary wrote:

In the film, all the names, sexes and ages of the children were changed and Agathe, whose character was called Liesl, was played by Charmian Carr, who sang 'Sixteen Going on Seventeen'. Agathe recalled however, 'As a teen, I had never had a boyfriend, much less a telegram-delivering Nazi.' ... Upon its release, the family was not happy at the way that they had been portrayed. They were irritated by the simplification of the story, about being represented as people who only sang lightweight music, and by the alterations to their father's personality. He had been depicted as a detached, cold-blooded patriarch who disapproved of music, whereas he was actually quite the opposite; he, in fact, helped them learn to sing. In an interview in 2003, Agathe said she 'could have lived with' all the inaccuracies 'had it not been for the musical's portrayal of my father'.³

One can understand Agathe's resentment at the way she and her family were represented, and at the fact that she had virtually no influence over the way Hollywood chose to deal with what she knew to be the 'facts' of the situation. It leads me to wonder if, at least in relation to events of recent history, filmmakers believe they have no responsibility to anything but dramatic emphasis and box office returns.

Adaptation and story: fiction and film

As far as the adaptation of fiction to film is concerned, I have always taken the line that Orson Welles, himself a fearless adaptor of plays and novels, once summed up by saying that if a filmmaker has nothing new to say about a work of literature he'd best leave it alone. Nothing seems to me more stultifying when adapting, say, a novel into film, than a sense of reverence in regard to the antecedent text – the sort of slavish fidelity one has sometimes detected in television versions of classic fiction. For the film to be exciting, to be a coherent work in its own right, the filmmaker surely needs to find a unique voice, a unique point of view on the material being adapted, and to be courageous about what is omitted, or sidelined, or emphasised. The novel is a fiction, even if it features some real-life characters and events, and the film adapted from it is another fiction, which can and should be judged on its own merits. Very recently, I was pleased to read Christos Tsiolkas' reason for not writing the scripts for the TV miniseries based on his novel *The Slap*: 'I felt I'd already written the book I wanted to write, and for it to work [on TV], it had to have other imaginations, another consciousness, transforming it.'⁴

Adaptation and the 'real' world

What about the concept of adaptation when it is a matter of shaping actual events, involving real, possibly still living persons, into film drama? Are there any ethical issues that need to be taken into account? It's not as though documentary filmmaking can be let off this hook either. It is now a truism that, however zealously documentary tries to give the impression of an unmediated relationship with reality, it is nothing of the kind. The mere act of making a documentary film about anything implies shaping, selection and often a highly personal approach to the material. Just think of such comparatively recent examples as Terence Davies' *Of Time and the City* (2008) or Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect* (2003): the former recalls the Liverpool of his youth in exquisite black-and-white images and tends to use colour to suggest the insidious debasing of the city he loved, and the latter has a story to tell about the search for a father Kahn scarcely knew as well as an exploration of his architectural triumphs. These are both documentaries, but more or less explicitly make what they want of their own experiences. And maybe the fact that these *are* their own gives them a latitude where 'fiction' filmmakers, by comparison, need to be more cautious.

Need filmmakers feel *no* restraint when it comes to distortions of 'history'? I'm aware of putting more words than usual in inverted commas, as I become uneasy about the problematic nature of the concepts thus enclosed. In 1945, there was justifiable



FROM TOP: BALIBO, THE SOCIAL NETWORK, THE SOUND OF MUSIC

outrage in Britain at the way the Errol Flynn war-winner *Objective, Burma!* (Raoul Walsh) 'invented a fictitious American parachute regiment that was seen in the final stages of the film to be dropping over the jungle and winning the decisive battle on its own',⁵ omitting reference to the British collaboration. How, I wonder, would Australia react to a film version of history that sought to show the British as the heroes of Gallipoli and Australian troops as indolent, loud-mouthed larrikins, or if *Schindler's List*

Hilary and Jackie (Anand Tucker, 1998), the story of the du Pré sisters, which excited outrage among London's musical fraternity; or of creating a cracking social drama as in the very recent *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010), supposedly the story of Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg, who has questioned the film's authenticity about his reasons for this pioneering work.

Rather than the conventions of biopic, I'm interested in the way the screen has rendered 'historical events'. By this latter term

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(Steven Spielberg, 1993) had suggested that the horror of the Holocaust had been grossly exaggerated?

My main concern here is not with the biopic genre, but it is perhaps worth noting the remarkable licence that has been taken in relation to famous 'lives': whether in the interests of white-washing, such as when Cary Grant played Cole Porter in *Night and Day* (Michael Curtiz, 1946), which erased all reference to Porter's homosexuality; or of pumping up the melodrama as in

I mean an often disorderly series of events in which the causal chain may not always be clear, and between which are suppressed all manner of quotidian trivia, or even just non-trivial matters that don't happen to bear on the particular string of events that the general public are aware of. This is not to suggest conscious dishonesty, though that may well be the case on occasion, but that there is no way of creating a 'story' out of the ramshackle events of the real world without imposing a level of order that was not there in actuality. In doing so, the truth as understood in the real world may be a casualty.

Recent film histories – or histories on film

Among comparatively recent examples of what I mean are such titles as *Good* (Vincente Amorim, 2008) and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Mark Herman, 2008), both making drama out of the rise of Nazism and its effects on the lives of two families. Other recent examples are *Capote* (Bennett Miller, 2005) and *Infamous* (Douglas McGrath, 2006), both of which dealt with the cold-blooded murder of a Kansas family and Truman Capote's investigation of this. All four of these films are geared to produce, in varying degrees, powerful melodrama, mingling 'known facts' with fictional shapings. In the last year alone, I have seen at least a dozen films which in one way or other claim to be based on/inspired by a true story/actual events. These include such diverse titles as *Nowhere Boy* (Sam Taylor-Wood, 2009, tracing the pre-Beatles ambience of John Lennon), *Bright Star* (Jane Campion, 2009, exploring poet John Keats' love for Fanny Brawne), *Beneath Hill 60* (Jeremy Sims, 2010, how Australian miners changed the course of WWI), *Creation* (Jon Amiel, 2009, how Charles Darwin upset the Genesis myth), *Me and Orson Welles* (Richard Linklater, 2008, the boy-genius' 'real' Mercury Theatre and a fictional 'Me'), *Fair Game* (Doug Liman, 2010, US political bastardry as experienced by CIA agent Valerie Plame) and the aforementioned *The Special Relationship*, *Made in Dagenham* and *The King's Speech*. There are no doubt plenty of other titles that could be added, but that's enough – numerically, generically and nationally – to give a sense of how endemically filmmakers 'adapt' true 'stories'.

While watching the TV movie *U Be Dead* (Jamie Payne, 2009), which claims to be 'based on a true story', I was struck by one of the recurring characteristics of this (sort of) genre: the perennial use of captions, from titles giving dates and places to final accounts of what became of this or that person. Sometimes, of



GALLIPOLI



THE CAT'S MEOW

course, this sort of thing is used in wholly fictional stories (remember the end titles for Peter Weir's 1975 *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, intended to leave us thinking we'd witnessed the retelling of actual events?), but in those films which ostensibly deal with 'true stories' we're encouraged to accept their veracity by the inclusion of these seemingly objective historical comments. Actually, I suspect the word 'genre' is less appropriate than 'mode', since the films that derive their existence in the ways I've been discussing can quite easily cross traditional generic boundaries. Speaking of those captions, though, I recall my surprise to arrive at the end credits for *The Cat's Meow* (Peter Bogdanovich, 2001), based on a quite well-known set of

sensational events involving Hollywood celebrities on William Randolph Hearst's yacht in 1924, when suddenly there appeared this disclaimer: 'The characters, the events depicted and the names used are fictitious. Any similarity to any actual persons living or dead or to any actual entities or events is entirely coincidental and unintentional.' So, we were meant to accept that characters with names like Charlie Chaplin, Louella Parsons and Marion Davies had no real-life referents? Who are the filmmakers fooling? Sharp-eyed potential litigants, possibly.

It would be easy to say that it's all a matter of selection and interpretation in the process of making persuasive drama out of the indocile material of real life, but this wouldn't get us very far. What interests me are the ways in which filmmakers go about the business of adapting messy reality into film. All films are based on some sort of transaction with reality and for the most part we accept this unquestioningly. My particular concern here has been with those that foreground their allegiances to 'true stories' or 'actual events', often with disclaimers to that effect.

A bunch of five

All films designed for the entertainment of large audiences (leaving aside such experimental works as some of Andy Warhol's films of the 1960s) will build up some sequences for dramatic effectiveness. This is as true of films based on actual events as any other. Bruce Beresford's biopic *Mao's Last Dancer* (2009), with its astutely executed contrasts between life in a rigorous communist regime in rural China and the easy indulgences of Western ways in the US, is a case in



ME AND ORSON WELLES



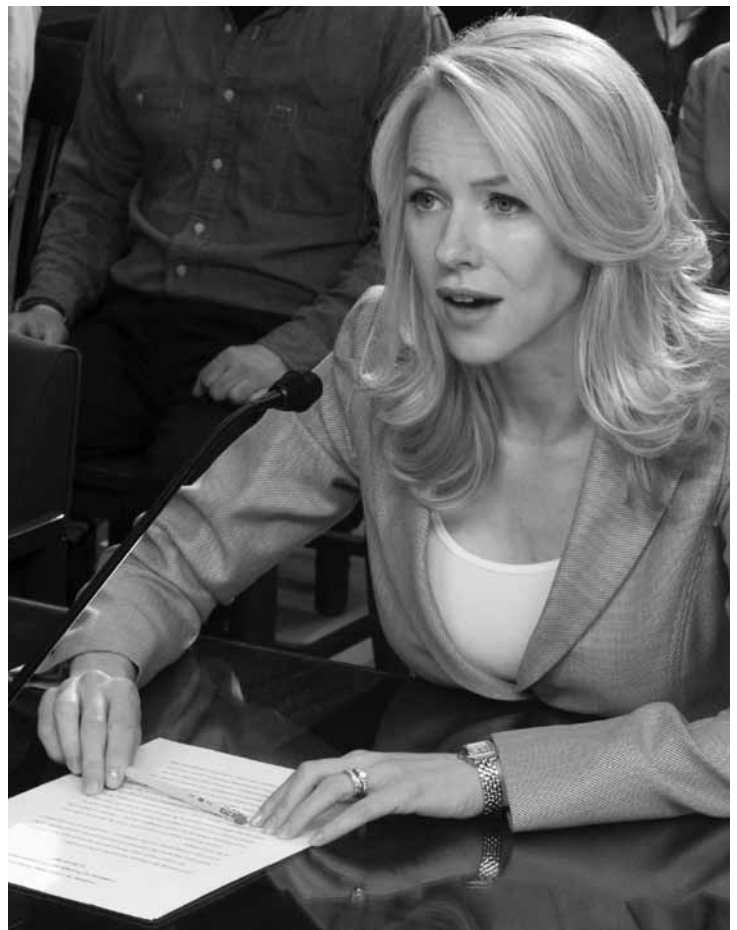
THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

point. Jan Sardi's screenplay adapts Li Cunxin's memoir in such a way as to provide some tightening of the narrative's drama in certain key episodes, such as when Li (Chi Cao) debuts on a US stage as a replacement for the male lead at a performance before the president. As the audience waits with bated breath, Li's whole life seems to flash before him, and what follows has a kind of *A Star Is Born* quality to it. There is tension when China won't extend his visa and Li is taken away by consul staff, becoming an object of interest in the US press, and a judge tries to restrain the consul from returning Li to China. The film makes clear the conflict here for Li: if he defects, he fears he will never be allowed to return to China. There is another major scene in Houston 1986 when he dances *The Firebird* and Beresford shows a remarkably sure sense of the sort of climactic moment a film like this needs, as he orchestrates an on-stage reunion between Li and his parents. It's a heart-stopper in an old Hollywood tradition – and may just happen to be derived from life.

In last year's *The Special Relationship*, Tony Blair (Michael Sheen in his third incarnation of Blair) pays two visits to Washington. On the first occasion, he arrives at the airport and looks about for a taxi driver holding a card bearing his name upside down. Next time he arrives there about four years later it's a very different and astringently observed matter, his new status marked with due pomp. This time he's to meet Clinton (Dennis Quaid) who tells Blair, with regard to his forthcoming election: 'The smart money's on you'; 'If you need my help just pick up the phone'; and 'We could put right-wing politics out for a generation.' Whether or not this is the way the two arrivals actually happened obviously doesn't matter much; rather, it is the film's way of establishing, through its control over *mise en scène*, a crucial shift in the

relationship. And it inevitably recalls to us how the film had begun with Cole Porter's lyrics 'If you're ever in a jam, here I am' on the soundtrack, and newsreel shots of Churchill and Roosevelt, Kennedy and Macmillan, and Thatcher and Reagan all cosying up with each other. A structural parallel, details of *mise en scène*, a memory of non-diegetic music and dialogue, along with a pair of skilful actors, all play their parts in establishing the film's eponymous subject with a conciseness that was unlikely to be the case in real life. It is the film's function at this point to make us notice how different the two arrivals are and what this difference means. And the way the film ends with Blair being matey with the newly elected Bush, the latter seen only in news footage, reminds us that it began with newsreel material, and this is another important structuring tactic. It is a way of saying both that the film is crucially about the Blair-Clinton duo and that the UK-US alliance both pre- and post-dates this particular version of the special relationship.

In the last moments of *Fair Game*, set in March 2007, the film cuts from CIA agent Valerie Plame (Naomi Watts) standing before a congressional committee of inquiry to a news report featuring the real Plame. Perhaps this use of news footage is one of the ways in which these films go about persuading us that we have been witnessing actual events, as is the frequent use of titles stating exact dates and places. The rest of the admirable *Fair Game* chronicles Plame's outing as an operative, purportedly as reprisal after her journalist husband Joe Wilson (Sean Penn) outspokenly questioned the way the Bush administration handled the so-called evidence of weapons of mass destruction in relation to the war in Iraq. As well as the political action at the heart of the film's narrative there is a tensely credible account of the effects of these



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *MADE IN DAGENHAM*, *FAIR GAME*, *BRIGHT STAR*

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events on the marriage. One reviewer raised this issue: ‘Whether moviegoers even today can look at this real-life couple, extremely well-played by Naomi Watts and Sean Penn, without the distortion of political beliefs is uncertain.’⁶ That is, it’s not just the political sympathies of director Doug Liman or screenwriters Jez and John-Henry Butterworth that are at issue – their sympathies have no doubt worked to shape the narrative put before us – but our beliefs and prejudices will play their part in how we receive this version of a ‘true story’.

A fascinating but tangential film among these titles is Richard Linklater’s *Me and Orson Welles*, based on (notice how easily one slides into this usage) Robert Kaplow’s charming 2003 novel. Despite the fact that Linklater has not only followed the main narrative contours of the novel but has also lifted dialogue wholesale, there is no sense of slavish adherence. My real point in adducing this film is not to discuss it as an adaptation of a literary work but as a film that, like the novel, combines pure fiction with a persuasive account of a real-life phenomenon. The ‘fiction’ involves the engaging ‘Me’ of the title who, in late 1930s US, wants to opt out of school for a stage career. The ‘real-life’ material is derived from Welles’ boy-wonder career, which included the 1937 founding, with John Houseman, of the Mercury Theatre in New York. Here, among other notably iconoclastic work, he produced a modern-dress version of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. It is into this setting that Richard (Zac Efron), the ‘Me’ character, works his way in, falls foul of Welles (Christian McKay), is reinstated in time for opening night and is then sacked again. One of the great things the film can do

that the novel can’t is to show us slabs of Welles’ *Caesar*, his radical production. And it is strikingly enough staged to make us believe in its power to have brought an audience to its feet – and critics to their knees. So, what we have here is a film partly ‘inspired by’ seriously treated actual events into which is inserted a wholly fictional character’s story – and his is a *real* story, with a structure and a sense of narrative causality, as he mingles with such ‘true-life’ characters as Welles and Joseph Cotten.

The film that has brought all these somewhat random thoughts to mind is *The King’s Speech*. As I said in my review of this film for *Metro*,

There is a very interesting shift in the way the film presents Logue’s character in comparison with the figure that emerges in his grandson’s book and its primary source material – Logue’s own diaries. The film coarsens Logue ... It is, in the light of the social reality of the time, unlikely that Logue would have been quite so quick to assert his equality as he does in Rush’s compelling and vivacious account of the man.⁷

Since writing this review, I keep coming across references to the *reality* of the King’s problems and/or Logue’s therapies.

Colin Firth has won an Oscar and a Golden Globe for his performance as the troubled Prince Albert, later George VI, but not without controversy: in the lead-up to the Academy Awards, a London newspaper reported ‘an apparent internet smear campaign alleging that the wartime monarch had Nazi sympathies ... and that he actively



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“stymied” efforts by Jews fleeing Nazi Germany to settle in British-controlled Palestine.⁸ Now, there is no reason why the film should be required to give us a fully rounded characterisation of the king, but it is significant that the cinematic rendering of a real-life figure should attract this kind of attention. If what this report suggests was in fact the case, this is simply another example of the filmmakers’ need to achieve dramatic structure and, in this film, to maintain sympathy for the stammering king. On the matter of the stammering, a speech pathologist has written, ‘Stuttering is ancient, but its treatment has now evolved away from stuffing your mouth with marbles and you don’t have to swear to deal with it,’ going on, however, to praise Firth’s performance: ‘Although the stammer may have sent critics’ thumbs a-wagging, it was more Firth’s portrayal of the social and emotional implications of being a person who stutters that nailed the part.’⁹

In the same day’s newspaper were two other related items. One reported on the way in which ‘similar accusations [to the pro-Nazi smear] are a popular trick of orchestrated smear campaigns’.¹⁰ The other item made the claim that the film ‘air-brushed from history a Scottish surgeon who many believe was the key figure in transforming a stammering, sickly prince into an imposing wartime monarch’.¹¹ This article did not deny that Lionel Logue’s role in curing the king of his stammer was ‘crucial’, but claims that it was Sir Louis Greig ‘who gave Prince Albert the confidence to overcome his frailties’, whereas ‘the film shows Mr Logue ... single-handedly coming to the rescue’.¹² Another of these pieces to come my way was a sympathetic account of Logue as ‘a mini-celebrity in isolated Perth in the early 20th century ... [one whose] gentle, compassionate temperament led him to work with shell-shocked ex-servicemen who had developed speech defects’.¹³

The point of adducing these newspaper items is to draw attention to what are seen as serious suppressions or distortions of Logue’s dealings with George VI. Such suppressions or distortions are no doubt made in the interests of drama, perhaps with the aim of illustrating, as one reviewer wrote, ‘how the Brits go about making a buddy movie’.¹⁴ The memoir, drawing heavily on Logue’s diary entries, makes clear that his dealings with royalty were deferential, even on occasion to the point of ‘fawning’.¹⁵ It is the interaction of the real and the reel – how the latter deforms or re-forms the former – that accounts for the sorts of commentary I’ve been quoting.

Everyone will approach a film differently and take from any film a unique set of responses. All I am suggesting is that knowledge of the ‘factual’ or the ‘actual’ or the ‘true’ will inevitably colour how one receives films that are ‘inspired by a true story’. For starters, I’d recommend getting rid of that word ‘story’. The ‘story’ is created by a filmmaker who has removed all that might muddy the clear waters of the drama – the story – in hope of making a killing.

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Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Brian McFarlane, ‘A Road Movie Without a Road: An Interview with Michael James Rowland’, *Metro*, vol. 153, p. 24.
- 2 Brian McFarlane, ‘The Odd Couple: Language and Life Lessons in *The King’s Speech*’, *Metro*, vol. 168, pp. 8–12.
- 3 Martin Childs, ‘Agathe von Trapp: Eldest daughter of the family who inspired “The Sound of Music”’, *The Independent*, London, 4 January 2011, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/agathe-von-trapp-eldest-daughter-of-the-family-who-inspired-the-sound-of-music-2175129.html>>, accessed 13 September 2011.
- 4 Quoted in Paul Kalina, ‘*The Slap* set to leave its mark on the small screen’, *The Age*, 22 January 2011, p. 11.
- 5 Clive Coultass, *Images for Battle: British Film and the Second World War, 1939–1945*, University of Delaware Press, Newark, NJ, 1989, p. 193.
- 6 Kirt Honeycutt, ‘Fair Game – Film Review’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 14 October 2010, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/fair-game-film-review-29648>>, accessed 13 September 2011.
- 7 McFarlane, ‘The Odd Couple’, op. cit., p. 12.
- 8 John Bingham, ‘Nazi claim threatens to ruin Firth’s Oscar night’, London *Telegraph*, reprinted in *The Age*, 20 January 2011.
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- 10 Garry Maddox, ‘Smears are no surprise to King’s Speech producer’, *The Age*, 24 January 2011, p. 7.
- 11 Robert Mendick, ‘Hit film silent on man who saved a king’, *The Age*, 24 January 2011, p. 11.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Helen Trinca, ‘Performer from Perth gave voice to a king’, *The Weekend Australian*, Inquirer, 1–2 January 2011, p. 5.
- 14 Tom Ryan, ‘*The King’s Speech*’, *The Sunday Age*, M, 26 December 2010, p. 18.
- 15 Mark Logue & Peter Conradi, *The King’s Speech*, Quercus, London, 2010, p. 228.