

Rasputin

US TV : 1996 : dir. Uli Edel : : 105 min
 prod: : scr: Peter Pruce : dir.ph.:
Freddie Findlay; Tamás Toth (?)
 Alan Rickman; Greta Scacchi; Ian McKellen; David Warner; John Wood; James Frain;
 Ian Hogg; Sheila Ruskin; Peter Jeffrey; Julian Curry; Laszlo Aron; Janos Bata; Istvan Bicskei

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Opulent, revisionist retelling of the tale of the Mad Monk who befriended and advised Russia's last royal family, with a wicked, wild-eyed performance by Rickman as the drunken, womanising mystic. Equally impressive: McKellen's compassionate Tsar Nicholas. This take, by writer Peter Pruce, has Stolypin, the Tsar's prime minister (John Wood) part of the conspiracy to do in Rasputin in 1916, Stolypin's own murder in 1911 notwithstanding. Made for cable. **Above average** "

Radio Times review:

"Those who only associate director Uli Edel with the infamous Madonna vehicle **"BODY OF EVIDENCE"** will be pleasantly surprised by this Emmy and Golden Globe-winning biopic that was a huge hit in the States. In a production that's as far from staid television costume drama as you can get, Alan Rickman is dangerously dynamic as the Mad Monk and spiritual adviser to Russia's royals. His performance is matched by Greta Scacchi as Tsarina Alexandra and by Ian McKellen as Tsar Nicholas. There are historical inaccuracies, but it captures the atmosphere of the time. Contains violence and sex scenes. **** "

"Biographical drama. Late 19th-century Siberia: following a religious vision, a mystic of dubious powers manages to insinuate himself into the court of the Tsar and Tsarina. **** "

No further information currently available. I watched only the second half, to compare Rickman's with the many other film versions of this episode in the rise of communism. The cast is well larded with British stalwarts, and it certainly has a more filmic quality than one expects of TV costume epics, but with such a familiar tale one hopes now for some subtler evaluation of the central personality, or a less wistful/deferential view of the doomed Romanoffs. We witness their personal anguish and suffering at close hand, while the millions of ordinary Russians who died of starvation or were butchered at the front through Nicholas's inept rulership go quite unlamented. This is still – even in the post Cold War era – a distinctly White Russian take on events. And Rasputin remains simply the “Mad Monk”, only one with the prescience to forecast the slaughter of the royal family within two years of his own death.

The story, curiously enough, is narrated for us this time by the young Tsarevitch Alexei, whose haemophilia provided the entrée for Rasputin to the inner court circle. He died along with his family of course, but the film has a postscript to the effect that – as of 1996 under Yeltsin (equally mad and drunkardly if it comes to that) – the disinterred remains of the Romanoffs were awaiting consecrated reburial, but the remains of Alexei were never discovered. Freddie Findlay, who played the central part of Magnus Gove in **“A FEAST AT MIDNIGHT”**, brings genuine pathos to the sickly young prince, and conveys all too vividly the terror in the cellar where his family are shepherded, “to have their photograph taken”, and hear the assassins approach.

Rickman's Rasputin, unlike Barrymore's in **“RASPUTIN AND THE EMPRESS”** (32), is portrayed as genuinely compassionate to the boy Alexei and Tsarina Scacchi, not merely exploiting their gullibility to enrich his social status. Nor is he Christopher Lee's imperious mesmerist of the British 1956 **“RASPUTIN THE MAD MONK”**, or Tom Baker's Cossack opportunist in **“NICHOLAS AND ALEXANDRA”** (71). Something, but still not enough, is conveyed of the lesser royals' innate contempt for this upstart peasant. Class prejudice was surely as keen a motive in his murder as any fear for the virtue of the Tsarina or the future of the throne. Rickman chews the scenery, as the part more or less obliges, but I'm not so sure he generates the requisite charisma as well as some of the earlier incarnations did. I for one find it hard to take him seriously following his wildly over-the-top Sheriff of Nottingham in **“ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES”** (91). Tamás Toth plays the young Rasputin, but whether as a boy or not I couldn't say.

See subject index under **ARISTOCRACY / ROYALTY, EASTERN EUROPE / SOVIET BLOC, HISTORY** and **HOSPITALS / SICK CHILDREN**.