



**Battle royal:** (clockwise, from top left) Blanchett with rival Elizabeth Throckmorton (Abbie Cornish); Clive Owen as Raleigh; Geoffrey Rush as Walsingham; Rhys Ifans as Robert Reston; Samantha Morton as Mary, Queen of Scots.

# History repeating

Almost a decade on, what persuaded Cate Blanchett to don the ruff and ginger wig one more time? Buzz climbs aboard the set of *The Golden Age* to find out...

**On the hottest day of 2006**, a throng of Elizabethan sailors are baking in the midday sun, sweating in their heavy costumes, sporting a Sunglasses Hut range of shades, many holding mobile phones up to their dirty, smudged ears. Extras on *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, they're waiting to be summoned back into Soundstage E at Shepperton Studios for the firing of a cannon.

Wandering into the cavernous soundstage, which production designer Guy Dyas (now on *Indiana Jones 4*) informs Buzz has an illustrious history – it housed the set for the alien ship the crew discover in *Alien* (“That’s exciting for a geek like me!” gushes Dyas) – Buzz encounters a

majestic, nearly-life-sized Elizabethan galleon perched on a gimbal. The ship’s sails and other paraphernalia will be digitally added later, not to mention sea and sky – but the suspended hulk is still a breath-snatching sight – even more so when Buzz climbs on deck and is tipped back and forth in a simulation of riding the ocean waves. Getting seasick on dry land: Buzz isn’t proud as we demand to be let off on the gimbal’s next stop.

Designed as a Spanish galleon on one side and an English warship on the other, Dyas’ adaptable creation serves nearly all the at-sea needs of Working Title’s \$60 million historical sequel. Today, the ship is being steered by Sir Walter

Raleigh (Clive Owen) to face the onslaught of the Spanish Armada. As Owen gets grubbed up for his next scene, Buzz asks director Shekar Kapur about his second spin on the Elizabeth roundabout.

“The first film is about power, the second is about immortality – divinity,” the director muses. “People who come to absolute power aspire to be immortal. And in Elizabeth’s journey, she explores the possibility of living in a mortal relationship but realises that there cannot be degrees of divinity. So it’s quite modern in that way... It’s about self discovery.”

It’s been nine years since Kapur’s pacy, racy interpretation of Elizabeth I’s rise to queenhood put a rocket up the staid British costume drama, and made Cate Blanchett a star. The intention was always to reassemble for further chapters of Elizabeth’s glorious, epochal life, but it’s taken all this time before Blanchett, Kapur and Geoffrey Rush (who, as Elizabeth’s mentor Francis Walsingham, is the only other original cast member to return) found a script that they could agree on. Even then, Blanchett was nearly impossible to convince.



“She was reluctant to the point of almost being scared of doing it,” says Kapur. “She had created an icon with the first film, so it’s difficult to revisit because you can destroy the icon.”

“I didn’t feel like enough time had passed,” adds Blanchett, “until a story started to emerge and I could see there was an enormous amount to say with this character again. The first film was about denial – denial of having to become a ruler

Armada against England, as well as the shenanigans in Elizabeth’s court, where her favourite lady-in-waiting Bess Throckmorton (Abbie Cornish) becomes lover to Owen’s dashing explorer. “For me,” says Blanchett, “that love triangle between Abbie, Clive and me was very important because it was so different from the first film.”

Like any historical epic, *The Golden Age* slices and dices history to serve its dramatic purposes. For one, the Bess-Raleigh affair happened three years after the Armada. Kapur and co also credit Sir Francis Drake’s true-life anti-Spanish heroics to Raleigh, who in fact was

safe on dry land during the decisive battle. But Kapur deliberately echoes the modern world in his *Golden Age*, Philip’s devout fundamentalism pitched against Elizabeth’s freedom-loving tolerance being a blatant riff on post-9/11 anxieties.

“There’s no point making a movie unless it’s contemporary to our times,” he says.

“Fundamentalism and tolerance are issues that face us so clearly right now.”

At Shepperton, while Owen plots to wreak fiery havoc on the anchored Armada, *Buzz* itself is now firmly anchored to the soundstage floor, watching Owen and cohorts rock the boat on Kapur’s monitor and paying witness to a film attempting to wring epic intensity from an unyielding budget. While the Spanish invasion fleet will end up looking imposing on its approach, the mêlée is largely played out in water-lashed dialogue snippets.

But a pricey sea battle is not what *The Golden Age* is about, insists Kapur: “We’re only looking at the Armada in the context of the phoenix-like rise of Elizabeth,” says the director, who already has his mind set on a third film. “In my mind, *Elizabeth* has always been a trilogy. There’s one more to come. Although I’m not sure Cate is going to say yes to it...”

**‘In my mind, Elizabeth is a trilogy. There’s one more to come’**

– and this is a film about acceptance and having to confront the fact that she is aging.”

Settling on the middle years of the queen’s reign, *The Golden Age* focuses on the skulduggery (the Babington plot; the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots) that eventually leads Philip II of Spain – played as a fanatic, bow-legged loon by Jordi Molla – to launch his ill-fated Catholic

**KEEPING IT REGAL** For more from queenly Cate Blanchett, head to... [www.totalfilm.com/blanchett](http://www.totalfilm.com/blanchett)