

## “John Adams”

# Showing Hollywood how it's done

His new film is already making waves, his HBO mini-series is a critical and commercial hit. Hermione Eyre meets director Tom Hooper and asks: where did it all go right?

### **Hermione Eyre**

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Hermione Eyre is television critic of the “Independent on Sunday”

The director Tom Hooper will soon be in the spotlight for his new film *The Damned United*, released on the 27th March. Yet it is his HBO miniseries *John Adams* that is slowly burning itself onto public consciousness as one of the most absorbing, accomplished television dramas of recent times.

A revisionist account of the American creation story, *John Adams* includes ambiguities more usually suppressed by Hollywood—such as the fact that the founding fathers first fought not for independence but for their “rights as natural born Englishmen.” It is unafraid of committing patriotic heresy (hinting, for example, that George Washington fought dirty at the first election), while its hero is the often-overlooked second American president whom even his greatest champion, biographer David McCullough, describes as “short, fat and cranky.” And it’s unashamedly smart stuff. One memorable scene, which lasts five minutes, features John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton debating the pros and cons of federal assumption of state debt.

Hooper—whom I interviewed in early February—could barely believe his luck in being given this kind of creative freedom. “As I spent a few hours discussing this topic with Paul Giamatti, Rufus Sewell and Stephen Dillane [who play Adams, Hamilton and Jefferson respectively] I realised how wonderfully weird this was: here I was filming a \$100m miniseries without any pressure to dumb down at all. It could only happen on HBO.”

HBO, the subscription channel that made *The Wire*, is fast becoming an American institution. Hooper, however, is a natural born Englishman. Now aged 36, he was educated at Westminster and Oxford (finishing his first short film, for Channel 4, just before matriculating). He considers himself to have been “trained” by the BBC, where he cut his teeth on *Byker Grove* and *EastEnders*, before making the period dramas *Daniel Deronda* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, followed by *Elizabeth I* (for Channel 4, starring Helen Mirren) and the subtle, mesmerising *Longford* (written by Peter Morgan, also for Channel 4). Lured to Hollywood, he has taken BBC values with him. “To me, *John Adams* is classic public service broadcasting, thoroughly Reithian.”

Yet it is a commercial hit too, having sold 1m DVD sets in America—and won fans as diverse as Paul Haggis and Nancy Reagan along the way. How does HBO do it? “The audacity of HBO is that they produce so little: they invest a huge amount in just one drama, and then support it with a huge marketing budget and repeat it all through the week.” Do we make too much drama in this country? “Well, which viewer could ever watch it all? Arguably, one should make a bit less and fund and market it a bit better.”



John Adams is based on McCullough’s Pulitzer-winning biography, but also draws, Hooper tells me, on Gore Vidal’s *Inventing a Nation: Washington, Adams, Jefferson*. Taking his time to understand how these great figures are perceived in the American psyche, Hooper dawdled over casting Washington until, chatting to “Gore,” he picked up on his remark that George Washington had the “nobility of the simple-minded.” The character then began to take shape as something of a charismatic void, beautifully played by David Morse.

The drama traces the development of two schools of American thought: Adams’s belief, bred on the tough streets of 18th-century Boston, that strong government must counter man’s innate corruption, versus the more patrician Thomas Jefferson’s emphasis on man’s perfectibility. The ideas still echo today. “If you look at Obama’s inauguration speech, he is, I’d argue, speaking in the Jeffersonian tradition, asking Americans to rise to their better selves and respond to civic duty. I was also touched and interested that Obama used the American revolution as the central metaphor of his speech. One of his key points was that the founding fathers would not compromise their ideals for expediency’s sake in their own defence. He also repeatedly touched on the idea of struggle: how unlikely it was that the pioneers would succeed, how big English military power was, how hard it was for them, and how uncertain.”

Struggle is in every scene of John Adams—a thoroughly unpretty period drama, raw in its depictions of surgery, smallpox and the day-to-day hardships of travel and subsistence farming. “My vision was to capture the dirt and the mud,” says Hooper, who rejoiced in being able to build sets “and trash them” rather than having to film in beautifully maintained historic locations. Wary of the “shallow, reductive” implications of the phrase “costume drama,” Hooper wanted the piece to wear its history lightly. Research was still exhaustive (the actors listened to early archive tapes of New England fishermen to develop their bold period accents) but Hooper strived to make the outcome of the revolution feel uncertain, to “give a genuine sense of the provisional, improvised nature of history in those times.” Modern paradigms helped the actors into their parts. To help him play the slave-owning Thomas Jefferson, Dillane thought of the parallels between slavery and global warming. As Hooper explains: “Everyone was running around saying ‘it’s terrible’ but, because in the south their economic model was dependent on it, they felt there was nothing they could do about it—much as we do with flying.”

Still, in episodes three to five, Hooper does elevate the diction of his film, stealing from the soundtrack of Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* ("for me the defining period drama—nothing else is as good"), mounting the camera on a dolly and formally organising his shots into painterly tableaux. "The end of episodes three and four are a love letter to Vermeer and the other Dutch masters I have on my walls at home," he tells me, hastening to add that these old masters are "just posters, stuck in their clip frames from university."

If Hooper can make costume drama feel fresh, he can also make the recent past feel like costume drama. In *The Damned United*, Michael Sheen plays hubristic football manager Brian Clough, assuming the role with his usual chameleonic skill. Made on a budget of only £5m, it is essentially a period piece set in the 1970s and conjures what Hooper calls "a vanished England, before the makeover—before Murdoch's decision to buy [football] viewing rights and to pay so much for them." They filmed in Derby "because it's the only place left in the north that still looks that old, and in two years time that would have been impossible—or really expensive." And with that last, throwaway line, Hooper betrays the fact that he seriously considered building a lifesize replica of 1970s Leeds. Here, clearly, is a man whose ambition—or rather, whose dedication to his own very precise filmic vision—is limitless. With his next film set to be *East of Eden* for Universal, let us hope he does not permanently forsake television for the silver screen. ♦

*The "John Adams" DVD set is on sale now (HBO, £39.99)*