

TRANSCRIPT: The Crown

Season 4 Of 'The Crown' Introduces Princess Diana — And More Juicy Drama

TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. The acclaimed Netflix drama "The Crown" tells the story of Queen Elizabeth and of the United Kingdom over the course of her more than 50-year reign in season four, which drops on Sunday, the series has reached the 1980s and sees the introduction of two major new figures, Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana. Our critic-at-large John Powers says it may be the best and deepest season yet.

JOHN POWERS, BYLINE: The poet W.H. Auden once wrote that private faces in public places are wiser and nicer than public faces in private places. If any TV show bears that out, it's surely "The Crown," the endlessly enticing Netflix drama about the reign of Queen Elizabeth now entering its fourth season. While Season 3 was good, it felt a bit glum, with its characters congealing into middle age as Britain sank into greyness in the '60s and '70s. One kept hoping for more glamour, more sizzle.

These resoundingly arrive in the new season, which centers on the three biggest British icons of the last 50 years, all of whom happen to be female. The action gets started around 1980, when the queen, now in her mid-50s and still played by Olivia Colman, greets the arrival of two women who threaten her preeminence. First comes Margaret Thatcher - that's Gillian Anderson - the steely grocer's daughter whose sheer relentlessness made her not only Britain's first woman prime minister, but the most polarizing figure ever to occupy No. 10 Downing Street.

Shortly thereafter, Prince Charles - that's a superb Josh O'Connor - meets a fetching, well-born teenager named Diana Spencer, played in the star-making turn by Emma Corrin. Though Charles is in love with the married Camilla Parker Bowles, he's under pressure to marry. With the scene thus set, the next few years unfold in a procession of events large and small - stag hunts and avalanches, dinner speeches and press leaks, mass unemployment and apartheid, royal tours of Australia and war in the Falklands.

We see the emotional wreckage of Princess Margaret - played with wounded bitterness by Helena Bonham Carter - and most famously, the fairy-tale romance between Charles and Diana. Here, they meet for the second time when Diana approaches Charles in his car after the funeral of his beloved godfather, Lord Mountbatten.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE CROWN")

EMMA CORRIN: (As Diana) Royal Highness, I just wanted to offer my condolences. It must have been completely devastating for you. And your reading at the Abbey, how you held it all together under the circs (ph), I don't know how you did that. It was utterly brilliant.

JOSH O'CONNOR: (As Prince Charles) Thank you. I'm sorry. We haven't met.

CORRIN: (As Diana) We have. I was in costume at the time. Sarah Spencer's younger sister.

O'CONNOR: (As Prince Charles) Oh, the mad tree.

CORRIN: (As Diana) Diana.

O'CONNOR: (As Prince Charles) Yes.

CORRIN: (As Diana) Sarah told me how close you were to Lord Mountbatten, that he was like a father to you.

O'CONNOR: (As Prince Charles) Yes.

CORRIN: (As Diana) It must all be unimaginably awful.

O'CONNOR: (As Prince Charles) Thank you. It has been.

POWERS: Now, the show's creator and main writer, Peter Morgan, has always cared as much about being entertaining as being historically serious. And this season is filled with juicy scenes. Yet beneath the glossy pleasures, it quietly lays out big themes and conflicts. At issue are wildly differing visions of Britain, of royalty, of womanhood and of power. The queen's central conflict is with Mrs. Thatcher, whose almost cartoonish intransigence Anderson manages to humanize without softening. In often funny scenes awash in hauteur and side eye, the two take turns annoying and appalling when another.

Thatcher sees Her Majesty as a privileged idler who didn't earn her lofty position and whose ideas of noblesse oblige are sentimental and out of touch. In return, the queen sees Thatcher as a joyless bully who views Britain not as a family but as an oversized shop, showing no compassion for the millions thrown out of work by her economic shock therapy. They're both absolutely right. The more sympathetic is, of course, the queen, unless you belong to her inner circle. When family members come desperately begging for help - Margaret needs purpose; Charles needs praise; Diana needs warmth - the well-meaning Elizabeth shuts down. Faced with disturbing emotion, Colman's face lets us watch the queen's soul escape into a psychological panic room hidden somewhere in her skull. From there, she's only able to mutter bromides about duty and the monarchy that she herself finds oppressive.

But I know that what you really want to hear about is Diana. At first, I worried that she'd be impossible to play. How could any actress bottle the particular magic that let her wow the world? In fact, Corrin is startlingly good at capturing the princess's charismatic shimmer. Her Diana is silly and eager for attention. She adores playing to the public and basking in its affection. Yet this winsome young woman also exudes warmth, decency and fun. Such a virtuous leader's sadly unprepared for the bulimia-inducing loneliness that devours her from the moment she gets engaged to Charles, who might be pitiable were he not so self-pitying. And he passes the royal family's lovelessness on to Diana, resenting her popularity and leaving her to fend for herself as he continues to carry on with Camilla. Their vaunted fairy tale romance turns out to have been scripted not by Disney but by the Brothers Grimm.

Every season of "The Crown" seems to have a victim. Over the course of 10 episodes, the people's princess, as Tony Blair dubbed her, learns the hard lesson already learned by Prince Philip, Princess Margaret, Prince Charles, Princess Anne and many others during the show's previous seasons. Nobody at Buckingham Palace cares whether you're happy in private, only whether your public face helps assure the future of the crown.

GROSS: John Powers reviewed the new season of "The Crown," which starts streaming this Sunday on Netflix. I just recorded an interview with Gillian Anderson, and one of the things we talked about is her portrayal of Margaret Thatcher in "The Crown." We expect to broadcast that Monday. Tomorrow on FRESH AIR, my guest will be journalist Garrett Graff. His latest article is about what President Trump might do in the remaining days of his presidency. Graff says the transition period might be the start of the wildest chapter of an already controversial presidency. Graff directs the Aspen Institute Cybersecurity and Technology Program. I hope you'll join us.

FRESH AIR's executive producer is Danny Miller. Our technical director and engineer is Audrey Bentham, with assistance today from Al Banks (ph). Our interviews and reviews are produced and edited by Amy Salit, Phyllis Myers, Sam Briger, Lauren Krenzel, Heidi Saman, Ann Marie Baldonado, Therese Madden, Thea Chaloner, Seth Kelley and Kayla Lattimore. Our associate producer of digital media is Molly Seavy-Nesper. Roberta Shorrock directs the show. I'm Terry Gross.

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