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The World to Come review – a spellbinding romance of stolen hours

Mona Fastvold's drama stars Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby as 19th-century farmers' wives seeking escape from drudgery and husbands

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A pause from chores … Vanessa Kirby, left and Katherine Waterston in The World to Come. Photograph: Venice film festival

The World to Come is a ravishingly beautiful love story set in 1850s America, with painterly visuals that nod to the work of Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. I could stare at its dense forest landscapes all day, which is essentially what the film's characters do. All day, all week, right through the year, until a gnawing hunger sets in and they start to crave some fresh scenery. Every heaven becomes a hell if you're sitting beside the wrong person.

Katherine Waterston gives a moving central performance as Abigail, the farmer's wife reeling from the death of her infant daughter and increasingly estranged from her husband, Dyer (Casey Affleck, underplaying to good effect). Life is drudgery, the winters are harsh and the closest she draws to Dyer is when he catches a chill and requires an enema made from molasses and lard. Even the most passionate romance, one suspects, might struggle to survive a

molasses and lard enema.



Crafted wtih care ... The World to Come. Photograph: 77th Venice International film festival

At least Dyer owns his farm, which is more than can be said for irksome, insecure Finney (Christopher Abbott), who leases a nearby plot of land. Adding to his indignity, Finney has a wife, Tallie (Vanessa Kirby), who is so obviously his superior: a flame-haired beauty with a sharp, dancing wit (and, it must be noted, a wardrobe she wouldn't possibly be able to afford on her husband's meagre wage).

Abigail needs a friend; possibly something more. But now she is confused, cast adrift. "There is something going on between us that I cannot unravel," she says. So perhaps the hapless Finney only has a short lease on Tallie as well.

The World to Come is crafted with care by the Norwegian film-maker Mona Fastvold, lovingly built on ground previously settled by Céline Sciamma's Portrait of a Lady on Fire. Arguably, the film is too neatly tailored (both in terms of its fashions and its narrative) and maybe even a little too modern in its sensibility, to the point where one wonders whether these rustic 19th-century farmers would have been quite so open and articulate about their innermost feelings - or so bluntly insightful in tackling others' feelings. But these are quibbles; Fastvold's romance casts a spell.

When upstate New York emerges from its deep freeze, the land is ripped by screaming blizzards and a deadly blaze. Finney, we learn, keeps a record of Tallie's every move: where she goes, how long she stays. She's neglecting her duties and won't bear him a child. That she might love someone else is almost the least of her crimes.

In this, her second appearance in this year's Venice competition, Kirby gives a fine, charismatic turn as the free-spirited Tallie. But it's Waterston's quieter, more calibrated performance that holds the film together - and her poetic narration that shapes our sense of the tale. It is Abigail and Tallie's fate to be, in effect, chattels in a nation claimed and carved out by men. The most they can hope for is a few stolen hours amid their daily chores. They make their own small America in the woods, out of sight, and then trudge back to their farms when the cows need milking.