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SCREENDAILY

'The World To Come': Review

BY JONATHAN ROMNEY | 6 SEPTEMBER 2020

A friendship blossoms into love in Mona Fastvold's powerful period drama



SOURCE: VENICE FILM FESTIVAL
'THE WORLD TO COME'

Dir. Mona Fastvold. US. 2020. 98 mins.

It would be easy to sell *The World to Come* as ‘the female *Brokeback Mountain*’, but that would be to traduce the richness, singularity and command of Mona Fastvold’s beautifully executed and acted drama. The story of female friendship blossoming into passionate love in a severe 1850s American rural setting, this is an austere but lyrical piece underwritten by a complex grasp of emotional and psychological nuance, and a second feature of striking command by Norwegian-born director Mona Fastvold, following up her 2014 debut *The Sleepwalker* (she has also collaborated as writer on Brady Corbet’s features).

Understatement and interiority are the watchwords for a film which uses suggestion and period language very subtly

Scripted with heightened literary cadences by Ron Hansen and Jim Shepard, the film is well crafted in every respect, and marks an acting career high for Katherine Waterston, as well as a fine showcase for the ever more impressive Vanessa Kirby. Fastvold’s maturely satisfying piece, picked up internationally by Sony Pictures, should find acclaim on the festival circuit, and upmarket distributors will hopefully find a way to highlight its appeal to discerning audiences on the big screen, where its stark elegance will truly flourish.

The film is framed – with handwritten date captions – as a diary kept in the 1850s in rural upstate New York by Abigail (Waterstone), the young wife of farmer Dyer (Casey Affleck). Their relationship lies under the shadow of the recent death of their young daughter, and grief – along with the normal rigours of life in the remote countryside – is keeping them emotionally apart, with the thoughtful Abigail and the gentle but taciturn Dyer unable to communicate their feelings, as seems par for the course in a rural marriage at this period. One day, however, Abigail exchanges glances with a new neighbour, Tallie (Kirby), in a subtle hint of what could be classified love at first sight. When Tallie pays a neighbourly visit, the two instantly bond, exchanging confidences, with Abigail’s reserve gradually conquered up by Tallie’s candour and ironic knowingness about women’s domestic lot – something she is familiar with, being married to the possessive Finney (Christopher Abbott).

Working over the seasons, beginning with a descent into a harshly forbidding winter, Fastvold teases

out the shifts in the characters' lives, at first establishing a tone of pensive reserve, then setting a note of heightened peril (mortality, after all, really means something in this environment), notably in an extraordinary blizzard sequence. As the action enters another year, warmth comes into the two women's lives; at last their slow-simmering romance catches fire in tentative declarations followed by a first kiss, and the fond words, "You smell like a biscuit." There are flashes of overt sexual content, but used extremely sparingly and telegraphically towards the end, while Fastvold shows the meaning of Abigail's passion in subtle touches like a moment where she lies back on a table, fully dressed, in a quiet swoon of rapture.

Acted with finely calibrated subtlety, the film uses close-ups sparingly but to resonant effect, contrasting the cautiousness with which Abigail reveals her self and the warmer, more openly expressive face of Tallie. Waterstone and Kirby pull off something very finely balanced, conveying the enormity of their characters' emotions while speaking a stylised, formal, sometimes playful language: the script will be music to lovers of 19th-century American writing (Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Edith Wharton). As the two husbands, Affleck and Abbott contrast sharply – both playing deeply enclosed, solemn men, but of different emotional literacy, one with a capacity for moral generosity, the other shockingly without.

Understatement and interiority are the watchwords for a film which uses suggestion and period language very subtly. Poetry plays a part in the central relationship, but there's a poetic ring to the prose too, both in the dialogue and in Abigail's journal (both screenwriters are novelists, Ron Hansen having explored this period in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, the film of which starred Casey Affleck as Ford). This is also very much a film about the power and necessity of writing, as suggested by a line that compares ink to fire: "a good servant and a hard master."

Ink on paper is also sometimes suggested by the look of the winter sequences, colours bled to monochrome. Shot on 16mm by André Chemetoff, the film at once captures the look of period photography and establishes a feeling of contemporary realism, with no alienating sense of historical distance. The grainy texture of the images, combined with Jean Vincent Puzos's meticulous design, somewhat recalls the American period films (*Meek's Cutoff*, *First Cow*) of Kelly Reichardt, with something of the severe grace of Terence Davies's best work.

There is also a distinctive score by David Blumberg, foregrounding woodwinds - notably in the blizzard sequence, which has a feel of free jazz without being incongruous for the period (improvising legend

Peter Brötzmann is featured on bass clarinet). The closing song, featuring singer Josephine Foster, catches the period feel perfectly over manuscript-style end credits.

Production companies: Seachange Media, Killer Films, Hype Films

International sales: Charades, sales@charades.eu

Producers: Casey Affleck, Whitaker Lader, Pamela Koffler, David Hinojosa, Margarethe Baillou

Screenplay: Ron Hansen, Jim Shepard

Based on the story by Jim Shepard

Cinematography: André Chemetoff

Editor: Dávid Jancsó

Production design: Jean Vincent Puzos

Music: David Blumberg

Main cast: Katherine Waterston, Vanessa Kirby, Casey Affleck, Christopher Abbott