Watch This One: Mona Fastvold's Gay Romance 'The World to Come' Breaks Out Big at Venice

If the Venice breakout grabs a release in time, it could be an Oscar contender.

Anne Thompson

In the fall festival derby, everyone was expecting the Kate Winslet-Saoirse Ronan romance "Ammonite" to follow up "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" as the next must-see Sapphic bodice-ripper. (It plays Toronto later this week.) But the lesbian love story to break out first in Venice is actress-writer-director Mona Fastvold's second movie, "The World to Come," a grim yet achingly beautiful 1850s pioneer drama about two isolated farm wives (Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby) who escape from their domestic drudgery with each other.

After struggling to move forward with several projects as her follow-up feature to 2014's "The Sleepwalker," Norway-born Fastvold fell in love with someone else's story instead. She usually writes movies for herself and her creative and life partner Brady Corbet ("Vox Lux," "The Childhood of a Leader") as well as other filmmakers ("The Mustang" and Antonio Campos' "Homemade" episode).

As Fastvold worried about how to make the story her own, one image kept haunting her: a woman with a rope tied around her waist, disappearing in a snowstorm to rescue her husband. "I have to shoot that image," Fastvold thought. "How can I truly make this mine?" she asked Corbet, with whom

she shares a flat in Chelsea with their young daughter Ada. "It's already yours," he said. "You should trust your gut."

So Fastvold told the writing team Jim Shepard and Ron Hansen and producer Casey Affleck (who had bonded with Shepard on Andrew Dominik's "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford"), that she wanted to direct their adaptation of Shepard's short story. "These two women are normal women," said Fastvold on a call from Venice, where the film debuted to raves on Sunday night. "There's nothing special to look at in their story: they meet, have a connection, fall in love." But she saw an opening. "Something about the sheer beauty in their interaction and how they communicate to one another: 'I haven't really seen this before; I can take this classic love story, I can break open part of it, and do something with it.'"

That image of Abigail struggling through the storm to save her husband (Affleck) from freezing in the barn is central to the movie. "She's tethered to him and the house," said Fastvold. "She's literally bound to the place. There's nowhere for her to go, she's not in control of her own destiny. She doesn't have the freedom and opportunities of today. That image was exciting and poetic to me. It was the first thing I wanted to shoot."

One major addition to the script was showing the women making love. "I had a strong instinctual feeling about how I wanted to deal with the love scene and the physicality and placement of that," she said. "I want them to have a moment together. It is difficult to shoot love scenes, I think, to do it right. We're not given that release and joy of seeing them together that we're longing for — we can feel for them as they fall in love — until it's late, near the end."

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During lockdown in the Hamptons, Mona Fastvold co-wrote and acted in Antonio Campos's short for the Netflix series "Homemade"

As soon as she read the script, Fastvold could hear Waterston's voice as Abigail, the narrator-diarist of the film. "Her performances are so subtle," said Fastvold. "I'm always curious about her: 'What's happening here?' As an actress she makes me lean in. That's what I want from Abigail. We let you into her inner life through her journal. Katherine feels strong and also intellectual."

So who to play the gorgeous Tallie, who breaks down the reserved Abigail? ("My heart a maelstrom, my head a bedlam," she writes after one intense

visit.) Several people brought up Kirby ("The Crown"), including Christopher Abbott ("The Sleepwalker") who plays Tallie's possessive husband. "Vanessa has so much energy, a great sense humor and great timing," said Fastvold. "Also the role was written a bit younger, with an age gap. I wanted them to be just two women who meet and deeply connect. Vanessa is someone you would fall in love with, charming and beautiful, but she has a lot of depth, and a deep voice with a sense of authority; she plants her feet down and stands up straight and makes you listen to her. One of them needed to be brave enough to dare to let the relationship progress."



Katherine Waterston stars in "The World to Come"

Courtesy Venice Film Festival

In order not to fall into the trap of making the two husbands into cardboard villains, Fastvold asked the writers to add more humor to Abbott's character, to find some redeeming qualities, said Fastvold, "and make him more

dangerous, unpredictable, and mysterious."

For their part, Abigail and Dyer (Affleck) are partners who run a hardscrabble New England farm as they grieve for the daughter they just lost to diphtheria. "They depend on each other for survival," said Fastvold. "There is a tenderness in that partnership. Casey's character is not quite where he wants to be, he's not necessarily a farmer, nor a romantic. He picked her because 'we can be good partners, have lots of children, and run the farm.' He's desperately trying to give her room at times to feel better. The more complicated you make them, the more interesting the relationships are to unravel. The situation for these women, if it were today, would still be complex and hard."

The real challenge was shooting a low-budget period film in 24 days with in-camera practical effects. Remote rural Romania was tough, but Fastvold wanted the "unprocessed and unmanicured landscape up in the mountains," she said. "It was evocative of the period, with big rocks and roots cleared by hand." Fastvold shot on 16mm film for a gritty feel, planned the shoot carefully, and put her cast and crew through hell on a split schedule, starting in August and finishing in November, where they lucked out with one day of real snow.

And luck was also on their side as COVID-19 started shutting down the film industry. "We had just locked the edit," she said. "I flew back from Budapest after working with the editor." As her family in Norway told her what was happening there, she packed up and moved to Sag Harbor to form a lockdown bubble with her family, actors, and editors in order to do ADR and finish the mix. After she screened a few times in New York in a theater, with the film complete, she visited her family in Norway, and quarantined there for several weeks before flying to her world premiere in Venice.

Meanwhile, Fastvold and Corbet continue their ongoing partnership. They started as friends and writing partners, "and eventually lovers and having a daughter together," she said. "Brady acted in my first film. It is a symbiotic relationship. We still write together and produce for one another. It's an intense way of working, but it is the only way we know. We just find the collaborative aspect exciting."

Next up: While Fastvold writes something new, Corbet is prepping to shoot in Europe in early 2021. He's directing their script "The Brutalist," about the three-decade relationship between an architect (Joel Edgerton) and his wife (Marion Cotillard), who leave post-war Europe for America, where they encounter a wealthy and demanding client (Mark Rylance).

Fastvold, meanwhile, looks forward to Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisitions finding the right stateside distributor for "The World to Come." If the movie can find a release during this upside-down period, it could prove an awards contender. And Venice competition darling Kirby also boasts a second film, Kornel Mundruczo's "Pieces of a Woman," heading into the awards fray.

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