

Venice: Vanessa Kirby On The “Extremely Personal, Very Special” ‘Pieces Of A Woman’ & “Important, Beautifully Poetic” ‘The World To Come’

[Antonia Blyth](#)



Left, With Katherine Waterston in *The World to Come*; with Shia LaBeouf in *Pieces of a Woman*. André Chemetoff/ Benjamin Loeb

With two films premiering at the Venice film festival, [Vanessa Kirby](#)'s star rises still higher this year. Since her Emmy-nominated, BAFTA-winning turn as Princess Margaret in Netflix's [The Crown](#), Kirby has continued to carve out a career that ranges from the stages of the National Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre and Off Broadway, to action blockbuster *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*, in which she plays The White Widow opposite Tom Cruise—a role

she is about to reprise.

At Venice, Kirby stars in Kornél Mundruczó's [Pieces of a Woman](#), opposite [Shia LaBeouf](#). Written by Mundruczó's [White God](#) collaborator Katá Weber, and executive produced by [Martin Scorsese](#), the film tells the story of a couple whose home birth goes devastatingly wrong, resulting in the loss of their daughter. Then there's [Mona Fastvold's](#) [The World to Come](#). Set on the mid-19th century East Coast frontier, Kirby is Tallie, a woman who finds a deep love with her neighbor Abigail (Katherine Waterston). Casey Affleck produces and co-stars with Christopher Abbott.

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Here, Kirby discusses going deep undercover with LaBeouf at a New York birthing class, the great honor of telling a story of motherhood and grief, and her ongoing fascination with bold, but suppressed female characters like Tally.

DEADLINE: What was it about *Pieces of a Woman* that first attracted you?

VANESSA KIRBY: I hadn't found a character since Princess Margaret in *The Crown*, really, that I truly wanted to go really deep into. And so, they sent me the script for it, and then I met Kornél, the director, and I just was in love with it. It's an exploration of grief, and how everyone experiences grief differently. I hadn't seen a film about this sort of subject before, really. When I met Kornél, we had the best afternoon together, and I just knew that it was something I really wanted to do, so I felt incredibly lucky. Shia was already attached to it, and I had always admired him so much as an actor. Then we started the journey, and it required a lot, really. I had to go very deep into it.

DEADLINE: How did you and Shia go there together?

KIRBY: It was really tough, to be honest. It required so much from both of us, and it required a great trust and respect between us, because we knew that we were essentially creating something in the movie that then had to be completely dismantled and destroyed. A bit like they do in *Blue Valentine*. We were such good friends because I think we really did it together and created a really safe container to do that and to work in. And I was actually really scared to watch it. I was really daunted to watch it because doing some of those scenes was so painful. Feeling that level of grief. I found that really difficult to watch.

DEADLINE: There's an extraordinary scene with Ellen Burstyn, who plays your mother, where she wants you to fight through your grief, and compares it to her own terrible childhood experiences. It's so tense, it's hard to watch.



As Princess Margaret in *The Crown*. Netflix

KIRBY: Well, it really evolved. God, it was such a privilege to go up against her, she's just a titan, and we'd got really close and it really deeply explores the mother-daughter relationship.

I stayed overnight at her house a few times in New York when we were in production. We really got to know each other, so there was a deep love there, but also, we just thought it was so fun to play such similar and yet antagonistic characters. This movie is essentially a poem on grief, but it's also specific to Martha as a person, as a character. It's almost a character study on grief. How this person reacts to this kind of trauma, because of the generations of trauma and unresolved grief that's been passed down. It was so important to have that between mother and daughter. It's so unspoken, and I just can't imagine if you've spent your whole life feeling not good enough, then you fail at the one thing your body is supposed not to. There's

a shame in that, I think. The familial shame, the shame that her mother passed down to her daughter in that she's taught her daughter that, at any cost, you have to stand up, and you have to fight and you have to be strong and you do not share how you feel and you have to keep going, instead of really sitting with it and processing it.

I remember Ellen and I, we'd been really, really working on the scene together in the days leading up to it in her apartment. And then, on the day, I was just like, "You know what? I'm just going to shout it. I'm just going to shout at her." And so, I screamed at her, and I just thought, "Oh my god, Ellen." And it was so incredible, because in the first take, as I screamed at her, she just stood up and she just hit it straight back. It was just such an amazing day of shooting, because we just truly went head-to-head.

DEADLINE: Tell me about shooting the birthing scene. You've said it was a single long take?

KIRBY: Well, right from the beginning, Kornél wanted to shoot it as a one-take, and Shia and I were so excited by it, because it's like a dream, really, to do that as an actor. Also, it was really important, we really wanted, right from the beginning, to open a bit like *Saving Private Ryan* because Shia and I talked a lot about, if you don't have the backup, if you're not with them during this loss, and you're not with them in that experience, then the after effects—which is most of the movie—you're not with them in that.

So it was so essential that we got it really right, and it was really complicated as well, because how on earth, over the course of 30 minutes, do you make it seem like the birth is happening before your eyes in real time? I've never given birth myself. I thought, I can't do women a disservice by aiming to do this one continuous take and not make it like as authentic as possible because, you know, half the population are probably watching it, being like, "Well, I've done that. That doesn't feel true." I felt so nervous. I felt such a duty to it, so I was so lucky in that I found an amazing obstetrician, called Claire Mellon in London, and she allowed me to come

and shadow her on the labor ward. I was there with all the midwives, and they were teaching me so much, and taking me through moment to moment. Then I was so lucky that an incredible woman let me watch her give birth, and that, to me, was just a miracle, actually. Honestly, I look back and I couldn't have acted that. I would have been pretending if I hadn't really seen someone go through it for five or six hours, which she did. It was the most generous thing anyone's ever done for me, allowing me to watch. Then also, we were so lucky, we found other incredible woman, our birth consultant, Elan McAllister. Shia and I called her our Samurai, because she just helped us so much.

It's a total honor the film got into Venice, and there are very special things about that film to me, that it's extremely personal. For Kata and Kornél, it's their personal story, and it was just really meaningful, very special, for me, that movie. It was so important it was to do justice to the women I had spent time with who had told me their stories, whether it be still birth, miscarriage or neonatal death, who felt that it's still a really difficult thing for people and society to talk about in general, which was one of the most important things about the film. And that relates to Katá too.



With Cruise in *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*.
Paramount

DEADLINE: With *The World To Come*, what initially spoke to you about the role of Tallie?

KIRBY: I ignorantly didn't know that life was like that in some parts of America in the 1800s. It isn't that long ago when things were just so tied in. You were literally owned by your household, by the man that you happened to be married to. I just found it so moving, and it touched me so deeply, and the thought that you can't choose who you love and you can't even choose to do what you like, to love who you want. I also love the title *The World To Come*, because it was from those foundations

that we're still coming out of, really. And I found it beautifully poetic.

I liked Tally because she's such a life force. She's pushing against... it's just in her nature. There are so many women like that, who are this dynamic life force that didn't want to be confined. They were told they had to have no expectations, and to quell or crush their desires, and diminish who they really are. I just loved her because she was such a bright light, really, that then gets sort of extinguished. I just thought it was a really important story to be told.

DEADLINE: On screen you make her such a big presence. Obviously, there are aspects of the costume and the hair that really enhance that, but it felt like something that came from within.

KIRBY: I mean the wig helped. But yeah, I was like, "Look, I just want this person to be someone who was born in the wrong era, that has so much potential." I've always been really interested in women like that. I don't know why I gravitate towards playing them, like on stage where I started, my favorite characters are Masha in *Three Sisters* and Yelena in *Uncle Vanya*. Those women that can do so much with their lives that have so many restrictions on them. They're strangled by the things that they're born into, the places that they're born into, but also the psychological limitations that they put on themselves. And Margaret in *The Crown* is exactly that. I loved playing that part because it really is someone who is the biggest personality, that's caged in this institution, that so wants to express who she really is, but is so inextricably linked with the four walls of that institution. I love exploring those people. So it was a real gift to play Tally and also to do her just before *Pieces of a Woman*. I left Romania and I went straight to New York to go straight into pre-birthing classes with Shia. We met in character through a birthing class. So funny!

DEADLINE: Wow. Did people recognize you guys? Any funny looks?

KIRBY: I think we might've pulled it off, actually. They definitely didn't

recognize me, but maybe they recognized him. I think we just about got away with it. I had a wig for *The Crown* so much, I don't often get recognized. And we had to do all the exercises, we couldn't pretend. We did lots of stuff like that.

In *The World to Come*, we were living in a little valley in Transylvania in Romania together, all in one hotel in the middle of nowhere, the whole cast and crew. So, we'd cook dinners in the evenings, and we just sat all night, but you really felt like you were in the middle of nowhere, and I think it's so important to be as truthful as possible.

DEADLINE: And now you're about to get back to *Mission Impossible*, right? What else is next?

KIRBY: Yes, we're starting in September, so that'll be nice, because I really liked that character. I just like how weird she is and unusual and she's really fun to play, so I'm really looking forward to that. And what's next? I don't know yet. I'm just waiting for the right thing. With these two films, I just so loved them, and I think my aim really is just to play as many different characters as possible. Ideally as different as I can.

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