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'The World to Come': Film Review | Venice 2020

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Andre Chemetoff/Cinetic

THE BOTTOM LINE

An accomplished period romance nearly undone by one glaring flaw. 

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Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby play 19th-century farmers' wives who develop a passionate connection in Mona Fastvold's drama co-starring Casey Affleck and Christopher Abbott.

A friendship that blossoms into romance offers two mid-19th century farmers' wives refuge from their joyless marriages and routines of menial drudgery in Mona Fastvold's *The World to Come*.

Adapted from Jim Shepard's moving 2017 short story of the same title, this [Venice](#) competition entry is set in a rugged upstate New York where the winters are harsh and the patriarchy hangs heavy.

Resignation seems to be the default mode for Abigail and Tallie (Katherine Waterston and [Vanessa Kirby](#), respectively), the women at the story's center, whose lives revolve around keeping their husbands' stomachs full and their ambitions afloat. The initially halting, increasingly urgent intimacy that grows between them comes as a relief, but also a frustration — an agonizing taste of what life could be like if they weren't locked into roles dictated by their time, place and culture.

The World to Come has much to recommend it, including the polish and precision of Fastvold's directorial touch and a terrific quartet of leads (Casey Affleck and Christopher Abbott play the heroines' spouses) who, among other things, deliver mouthfuls of unwieldy period dialogue with dexterity and conviction. Kirby, especially, is a marvel, radiant and haunting as the more outgoing of the central pair.

That the movie succeeds to the extent it does is somewhat of a miracle given how often it gets in its own way. Indeed, *The World to Come* is nearly undone by a single glaring flaw: The drastic over-reliance on voiceover composed largely of lines lifted from the short story. On a sentence to sentence basis, what we hear — mainly Abigail's diary entries, read by Waterston — is vivid, at times strikingly lovely. But it's also so jarringly literary, and so extremely frequent, that it yanks us out of the delicate spell cast by the film's painterly, austere beautiful images and nuanced performances. Meant to draw us into the outwardly placid protagonist's churning inner world, the voiceover has the opposite effect: one of distancing and interruption. Rarely have I so wanted to tell a first-person narrator to — for lack of more delicate phrasing — put a sock in it.

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Shepard, the story's author, is credited as co-screenwriter (along with novelist Ron Hansen), so it's tempting to diagnose the problem as excessive fidelity to source material. Admittedly, the narration makes dramatic sense. Abigail is a stifled intellectual, and writing is her talent and escape; the passages from her journal give us access to feelings that her air of sleeves-rolled-up stoicism doesn't immediately suggest and her everyday duties — baking bread, plucking chickens, milking cows — don't provide an outlet for. *The World to Come* uses voiceover as its primary tool in building a portrait of female interiority.

But that choice underestimates the other tools at the film's disposal — namely, the director's own visual gifts and her first-rate cast. Waterston is a skilled enough performer and Fastvold an evocative enough stylist to conjure the depths of Abigail's desires and disappointments without having her give an emotional play-by-play. Much as I admired and was at times stirred by *The World to Come*, I'm convinced it would be a significantly stronger movie with 75 percent of the narration stripped away.

Early scenes pull us into the daily grind of Abigail and her taciturn husband Dyer (Affleck) as they struggle to keep their farm functioning while mourning the loss of their young daughter. There is distance between them — which Dyer openly deplors — though remnants of tenderness, too. Mostly, for Abigail, there is a numbing sameness to the days that pass.

A ripple in that sameness comes in the form of a new couple in the area: Tallie and her hog farmer husband, Finney (Abbott). From the moment Abigail lays eyes on Tallie — with her luxuriant tangle of red hair, splash of freckles and alert blue eyes — she's fascinated. Tallie returns Abigail's curious gaze.

Before long, the women are paying each other regular visits, candid Tallie coaxing reserved Abigail out of her shell. The two share gossip, grievances and, eventually, personal confidences as they create a space away from the men — the lives — they have settled for. Fastvold and her leading ladies establish the characters' dynamic and trace their dawning attraction persuasively, as Abigail finds herself dazzled by Tallie's boldness and independent spirit while Tallie is moved by Abigail's kindness and sharp intelligence. Their closeness is built from a gently crescendoing accumulation of gestures — stolen smiles and glances, the graze of a finger, a bundle of birthday gifts, a foot massage, a hungry kiss — and rendered more intense by their shared sense of looming danger; Abigail and Tallie know that if they're caught, the consequences will be dire.

The omnipresence of Abigail's narration during the movie's middle stretch may call to mind the recent work of Terrence Malick, a great filmmaker whose use and abuse of voiceover has become a devastating weakness. The heroine's musings here may be less drifty and dreamily existential than their Malickian counterparts, but there are eye-rollers of various types — from flowery ("my heart is like a leaf borne

over a rock by rapidly moving water"); to obvious ("Astonishment and joy," she sighs following her first embrace with Tallie. Then, in case we didn't get the memo: "Astonishment and joy. Astonishment and joy."); to TMI (when Dyer falls ill: "I've restored him somewhat with an enema of molasses, warm water and lard").

Those lines would be a heavy lift for any performer, and there's something a bit mannered in the hushed pitch and lilting cadences of Waterston's voiceover. She's much more affecting in her scenes with Kirby, the Modigliani-esque graveness of her face melting into a warm, giddy smile.

And how could it not? Kirby gives Tallie a mischievous gleam in her eye and a low, slightly naughty voice that makes her every utterance sound like a confession. The actress conveys more with a slightly cocked eyebrow and clench of the jaw than most do with an entire face-full of emoting, and her magnetism here feels effortless; Tallie isn't as flamboyant as Kirby's flouncy, fancily frocked Princess Margaret from *The Crown*, but she's somehow just as full of spark and drama.

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Affleck and Abbott, meanwhile, lend their characters dimension and specificity, making them more than cardboard impediments to their wives' fulfillment. Speaking in a hoarse, wounded whisper, Affleck locates something deeply human in the hapless, love-starved Dyer, a limited man who nevertheless is capable of seeing beyond his own needs — of having "sympathy," as he notes at one point. Dyer becomes a partner to Abigail at a crucial moment, something that differentiates him starkly from Kinney, a rigid prig who can't conceive of Tallie as anything but an extension of himself. Abbott plays him with a flicker of madness, a streak of sadism that gives the story's turn toward darkness a kind of queasy inevitability.

Even with its flaws, this represents a step up from Fastvold's last movie, the creepy but slight mood piece [The Sleepwalker](#) (2014). There's a sense of confidence and control here, starting with DP André Chemetoff's evocative compositions and scrupulously judged camerawork, which favors stillness over movement and balances close-ups with longer shots situating the actors within rustic, sparsely decorated interiors or more majestic outdoor spaces. The setting is stunning (the film was shot on 16mm in Romania), but *The World to Come* never succumbs to period-drama prettifying. Nature is seen as a wild, threatening force — Tallie's trek through a blizzard is captured with cacophonous nightmarishness — wielding as much power over the characters' lives as their own choices.

Daniel Blumberg's supple score, by turns mournful, playfully jazzy and full of roiling menace, is one of several other contributions that collectively create an impression of sensitive craftsmanship. Luckily for *The World to Come*, that impression lingers longer than the film's aggravations.

Venue: Venice Film Festival (Competition)

Production companies: Ingenious Media, Sea Change Media, Killer Films, M.Y.R.A. Entertainment, Sailor Bear, Yellow Bear Films, Hype Film, Panasper Films

Distributor: Sony Pictures Worldwide Entertainment

Director: Mona Fastvold

Cast: Katherine Waterston, Vanessa Kirby, Christopher Abbott, Casey Affleck

Screenplay: Ron Hansen & Jim Shepard, based upon the original story The World to Come by Jim Shepard

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

Executive producers: Christine Vachon, Peter Touche, Jamie Jessop, Andrew Morrison, Carole Baraton, Yohann Comte, Pierre Mazars, Ilya Stewart, Murad Osmani, Pavel Buria

Director of photography: André Chemetoff

Production designer: Jean Vincent Puzos

Costume designer: Luminita Lungu

Music: Daniel Blumberg

Editor: Dávid Jancsó

98 minutes
