

OUT POP CULTURE

## 'The World to Come' star on complexity of portraying a 19th century lesbian romance

Actress Katherine Waterston said she wasn't even halfway down the script's first page before she knew she was destined to play the role of Abigail.



— Katherine Waterston, right, and Vanessa Kirby in a scene from "The World to Come." [Bleeker Street](#)

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**By Max Gao**

Based on Jim Shepard's short story of the same name, "The World to Come" follows the lives of two farmers' wives who are left deeply unhappy by their neglectful husbands and the menial and mundane tasks that occupy their days. While Abigail (Katherine Waterston) grieves the loss of her only child while tending to the needs of her husband, Dyer (Casey Affleck), her free-spirited neighbor Tallie (Vanessa Kirby) bristles at the vindictive control of her husband, Finney (Christopher Abbott).

As the seasons change in 1856 in upstate New York, Abigail and Tallie find themselves inextricably linked. Liberated by their passionate devotion to each other, both women discover that their intimate bond is able to fill a void in their lives that they never knew existed, even if they do not have a framework to navigate their newfound love.

## THE WORLD TO COME | Official Trailer | Bleecker Street



Describing her character as “a very rich, complex and compelling figure,” Waterston was initially drawn to the lines of voiceover on the first page that seemed to permeate throughout the script. Given that Abigail is a reserved woman who internalizes many of her feelings, her journal entries – read as voiceovers in the film – are the only window into her true emotions. As a naturally expressive actor, Waterston felt a unique responsibility to contrast Abigail’s deeply pained internal life with the strong façade that she chooses to show the world.

“When you’re working with really brilliant actors that are giving you so much, the temptation is often to reward them with a connection,” Waterston, 40, told NBC News. “Sometimes, I felt like I was being a bit rude. An actor is giving me this amazing energy and performance, and I’m not making eye contact. Of course, the other actors know the reason why, but especially when you’re playing with people that you’re meant to love, you have that temptation to engage.”

“That was a challenge, but it was also very useful to me – that inner tension – because she isn’t someone who doesn’t want to engage. She’s someone who is struggling to do it; she has so much

to give and say, but she just doesn't know how to do it," Waterston added. "So, that desire to want to give something more to Vanessa, for example, but not being able to actually helped to ground me in the character and in her turmoil."

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Waterston was pregnant with her first child when she first received the screenplay for "The World to Come" in late 2018. For the better part of the next year, she pored over the limited written accounts of LGBTQ people from the 19th century to prepare for the role.

"It's quite difficult to find 19th-century accounts of working-class, LGBTQ people, so I just figured, 'I'll take what I can get from the more privileged stories that we have access to,'" she explained. "I read the Anne Lister diaries a lot, and what was really fascinating about those was: 'How did people engage with each other when they were alone? What were the conversations they had? How did they dare to start to express themselves to people, in a period where there was some risk in doing that?' Although they were accounts of more privileged people, those books – alongside the books about farm life – kind of helped me get to a place that felt like I could imagine her [Abigail] in this situation."

In addition to reading "the most amazing letters from medieval, 12th-century nuns" that resonated with the deeply romantic nature of her character, Waterston said she also discovered the well-known series of love letters between Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland from the 20th century.

"The first time they [Townsend Warner and Ackland] slept together, they decided that that night had been their marriage night. And just saying that right now, I have chills up my arms, because I played that thought in my head the whole time we were making this movie," Waterston said. "Once the characters had fallen in love, in every scene with Vanessa, that line was in my head. [I thought], 'What did people do when they feel love like they've never felt before and all they want is to secure it and keep it forever, and how do you express that?' You want to do that with marriage."

“For so long, there have been stories like this of people who have connected and have wanted that for themselves, but lived in societies that didn’t permit it,” she added. “So, whenever I saw Vanessa in a scene, I would always say, ‘I [want to] marry you’ in my head. This is something I imagine that so many people did in their imagination because in their dream life, they were married.”

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As their characters grow together and begin to feel “astonishment and joy,” Waterston and Kirby’s natural on-screen chemistry only seems to intensify, which Waterston attributes first and foremost to the “incredibly rich, fascinating script” that was developed over 15 years by Jim Shepard and Ron Hansen.

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The scenes “were just inherently exciting,” said Waterston, an “Inherent Vice” alum. “When scenes are written really well with a lot of room for the performers to play and surprise each other, it creates that tension. Everything that’s interesting about performing is that space between two performers, the energy that they share and pass back and forth.”

As a longtime admirer of Kirby’s work, Waterston said she felt there would be no better actor to partner with in this harrowing “pre-shame love story” about two women who feel more guilt about abandoning their respective marriages than about developing a fatal, same-sex attraction to each other.

“I really wanted her [Kirby] to do this with me, so there was kind of a trust there, even in advance of us leading [the film], because we liked each other’s work. I always feel really relieved when good actors get hired; I’m always more nervous before the casting is done,” Waterston said, laughing. “I think loving your co-star, getting on like a house on fire as Vanessa and I did, really helped with the moments of levity and the lighter moments of connection.”

“I think I just trusted her because I knew she was a great actress, and that helps a lot, even weirdly with intimate scenes,” she added. “Our friendship, that was immediate and really strong, certainly helped with those kinds of scenes. When they’re handled well, they’re just handled like every other scene.”

Waterston said she and Kirby discussed the love scenes with director Mona Fastvold, asking each other, ““What are we trying to say here about these two characters? What doesn’t the audience know that we want to communicate about their connection?” I think we talked a lot about that before we shot, and then, it just felt really safe and straightforward.”

“The World to Come” is now in theaters and will be available on demand starting March 2.

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Max Gao

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