



INTERVIEW: 'The World to Come' Director Mona Fastvold

Fiona Underhill, 7 months ago

The World to Come is set in the remote and rural Upstate New York in the 1850s and examines what happens when grief-stricken couple Abigail (Katherine Waterston) and Dyer (Casey Affleck) get new neighbours – Tallie (Vanessa Kirby) and Finney (Christopher Abbott). We met with director Mona Fastvold to discuss the various elements that make the film one of the best of the year – the thrillingly original score, the 16mm cinematography, the thoughtful costume design and the performances.

What was it about the short story that made you think it would make a good film? Did you read the screenplay first or the story first?

I read the screenplay before the story and it was interesting going back into the short story afterwards to see what Ron Hansen (co-writer of the screenplay) and Jim Shepard (who wrote the short story and co-wrote the screenplay) had chosen to include and what they had chosen to take out. I actually went back and brought quite a bit of text from the short story back into the film, as we were making it as well. I thought that this relationship and the language that describes and dissects that relationship – I thought there was something really poetic, yet modern about that. I thought this is interesting and this is something I want to

explore further. Immediately, when I was reading the screenplay, I had some very specific ideas on how I wanted to make it. I knew who I wanted to cast, I knew who I wanted to collaborate with on the music, I had a clear idea of how to make it into a film. I thought, when you have such a strong sense of what it would be like as a film then there's something there to explore.

One of my favourite things about the film is that heavy use of the narration from the story. Why did you believe it was so important to have so much of the narration in it and to have Abigail's voice guiding you through the story?

First of all, I thought it was a great challenge. It could be really unexciting, if it was just sort of put on afterwards or not truly integrated into the material of the film. But I thought, this is a wonderful challenge, it's exciting to me. I thought the text was beautifully written and interesting. I thought we have a lot of stories about really brave people, who do big things and this is a story about a brave person who does a big thing in her life, but a small thing in the larger scope of it all. Being led into the richness of her internal life, when she struggles so much to express herself – that's a character that it's worth spending some time with. I thought this is an interesting way of studying this particular character. And it's timeless, in a way, as well. There are a lot of quiet people out there, who also deserve movies and voices and stories to be told about them. I thought Abigail could represent one of them.



I do want to ask about the casting of Katherine Waterston and Vanessa Kirby in particular – you mentioned that you pictured them straight away, so what was the process like – of finding them and them agreeing to do it?

Yeah, Katherine was who I saw immediately and I heard her voice. As I was working on the script, I thought this really is who I see playing this role. It's because, to me, she feels both feminine and masculine, very strong and very vulnerable, she has a subtlety to her performance that I thought was very important, because she's going to tell us a lot about how she feels and what she's thinking, so the performance needed to be quite subtle, but at the same time have the sense that there's a secret. Katherine is a performer that

makes you lean in, she's not someone who jumps at you, so I thought that she was the perfect person for Abigail. So, I reached out to her and she immediately jumped at it. The first time we met, she was talking about the script and tears were streaming down her face, she felt so connected to the character. She really gave it everything she had, during our difficult shoot and our long prep period.

And then with Vanessa, I thought, I want someone with a very different energy from Katherine. Someone who has great comedic timing, who is extremely energetic. What was important was the pairing of the two of them, to me. In the short story, Tallie is a younger girl. But I spoke to Ron and Jim and said to me, that is not so interesting. I want her to be someone who has transitioned from girlhood into becoming a woman, is more in touch with her sexuality than Abigail, more in touch with her dreams and wants and what she is longing for, someone who will push the relationship further. So it becomes something more than just a friendship, drinking tea and doing chores. Someone who will dare to have those dangerous conversations about how they feel, not only about each other, but about their place in society, their husbands and all those things that were so scary to talk about at the time.

And the casting of Christopher Abbott as Finney? Again, another great contrast of energy, especially with his wife Tallie (played by Kirby)?

Chris was in my first film and if I can, I'll always work with Chris. He's such an exciting performer, he disappears into the parts he plays but he has so much charisma and I thought that we needed that for Finney. He's a very dark character, so I didn't want to cast a villain in the role or someone who would lean into that. I wanted to cast a *dynamic* villain, so I talked to Chris a lot about bringing that sense of humour and charm to the character, which perhaps in a way makes him feel even more dangerous. And playing into the alcoholism as well for him, as a way of dealing with his demons, so that's something we worked on a lot. He and Vanessa, I could have shot more scenes with them, if I'd had more time, they had such a great dynamic. A really wonderful way of ping-ponging back and forth.



I have to ask about one of the strongest aspects of the film, which is the phenomenal score. Can you tell me about the collaboration with Daniel Blumberg?

Yeah Daniel is one of my closest collaborators on the film and I reached out to him, I think before the film was even cast. I told him that I had the screenplay and said "I have a path to making it, I know my way into it but I would love for you to be part of it." He was excited about that also, right away. We started talking about instrumentations and talked a lot about clarinets early on, the sound of the wind and the bigger parts of the story. He came on set with me and during prep for a while, as well, he started making music while we were shooting. He also listened to Katherine, who would do lots of scrap recordings of the voiceover narration. We would find space and allow a lot of space within the filmmaking and the music. We talked about how this music and this voice can be in constant dialogue, so that was really important to us. The narration has to be this ASMR internal voice. A lot of people probably watched the film on their computer with headphones on rather than in the theatre. But even in the dark, in the theatre, we wanted a sense that it's almost your voice or someone whispering in your ear. So, the music had to support that, it was very important to us.

So he started working on set and also during the edit, he came for a while and had his instruments in the edit with me and was playing pieces to the screen, building the score with me and David Jancso the editor. Of course, with his wonderful collaborators in the UK, this group of musicians that he works with a lot and Steve Nobles, who is an amazing percussionist – he created a whole track of cowbells that are subtly chiming in throughout the film. They were always present, those bells on the sheep and the cows throughout shooting, so we wanted to bring that texture into the film. And brass was something that Daniel brought in to really push those bigger moments in the film. I was really excited about it and how it turned out!



What did you want to say with the costume design? I really like the scene where Abigail buys the blue dress, for example.



The costume designer, Luminita Lungu and I, we talked a lot about everything being created, we didn't rent anything, mostly because she wanted to wash the costumes time after time, age them in the sun, drive over them with her car, all kinds of things to really have them be lived in. To really distress them on the elbows, we wanted them to really feel lived in so you don't have this buttoned-up, perfect idea that you see in costume dramas where the collars are so white. Also to create some pieces that evoked their personalities, specifically. We were approaching the period more through paintings and early photographs of farmers, rather than looking at other movies. I think it's easy sometimes to be inspired by other films and I wanted to avoid that. I wanted to see an unusual piece and be inspired by that and what farmers looked like from photographs as well.

With the blue dress, I love that piece of text where Abigail talks of how her mother was only noted in her husband's ledger when she bought a new dress. So Abigail turns to Dyer and asks if he's writing anything about her and he says; "what are you talking about? I'm just recording what we've bought and sold." Verses Abigail, who's writing and writing and writing about life and everything around her – that's the difference between the two of them. So the blue dress is a way of her seeing if she can make herself known in her husband's writing, in this document of time, which I always liked as a detail.

What kind of discussions did you have with your cinematographer about the look of the film?

So, Andre Chemetoff and I both really love 16mm and I wanted to shoot on 16mm. It was also something I felt right away, this is going to be really exciting on 16mm, really fun to shoot because I wanted all that grit, all that texture as part of the image to help transport you the period. I love the scruffiness and the depth of 16, it's a format I really enjoy. It's also a little dangerous, we talked a lot about economy of light and how at the time, light was such a luxury. So creating the idea of smaller light sources like a candle or a lamp, you can't have too much of it, allowing for a lot of darkness, which is difficult on 16mm. You have to balance it, it's a fine line before it gets really grainy and not attractive. And again, we talked about 16mm evoking paintings of the era. I wanted there to feel like there's always dust and material in the air, constant texture, no make up, so you can see their skin and let it be as natural, as messy as possible. I hate when you can see the make up in period pieces when there should be no make up, it drives me crazy.





Where did you shoot? How did you find the location?

We shot very remotely, up in the mountains of Romania. Jean-Vincent Puzos, my production designer and Andre and I we just walked and walked up in the mountains there to find a place where we could place these farms. I wanted to find a landscape where I could shoot in any direction and not see anything modern and also what's great about the mountains up in Romania is that it's too high up to really use any machinery, so most of the farmland surrounding us was cleared by hand and with animals and old tools, so it's really easy to use that and have a landscape that really feels like the 1850s. It had big rocks and roots and uneven ground, which of course made it very challenging to shoot at times, it was pretty rustic and rough.

But I think the actors really enjoyed it as well, because they felt transported by just being up there and living life in a really simple way, just being immersed in the universe of the film while we were shooting, it really helped with the energy and the atmosphere as well. It was the forced method (laughs), Katherine had to get up early to milk the cows because she had to practice and you can only milk cows and very specific times of the day. It was great too, for the animals, because they walk freely with shepherds so all of a sudden a bunch of sheep or cows walk wander into our sets and we'd turn the camera in the other direction. It was a very interesting place to shoot and with the crew in Romania too, they're very skilled film workers, there's a lab there too so it's good to shoot on film.

The World to Come is out in UK cinemas from 23 July, 2021 (it's already available on Hulu in the US).

The World to Come – Full Review

