

Campion's 'Bright Star' shines in fall sky



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October 2, 2009

Jane Campion's absolutely gorgeous film "Bright Star" opens with its real-life heroine, Fanny Brawne, played with great sensitivity by Abbie Cornish, sewing. Unexpectedly, Campion gives us extreme close-ups of the needle piercing the cloth being sewn. Fannie is a seamstress and a student of fashion and Campion frankly dwells on the texture of fabric. Campion is clearly a student of texture, and in shot after



Ben Wishaw as John Keats in 'Bright Star' (c) Apparition 2009

exquisitely framed shot the texture of almost everything in a bygone era is so real you can almost feel it.

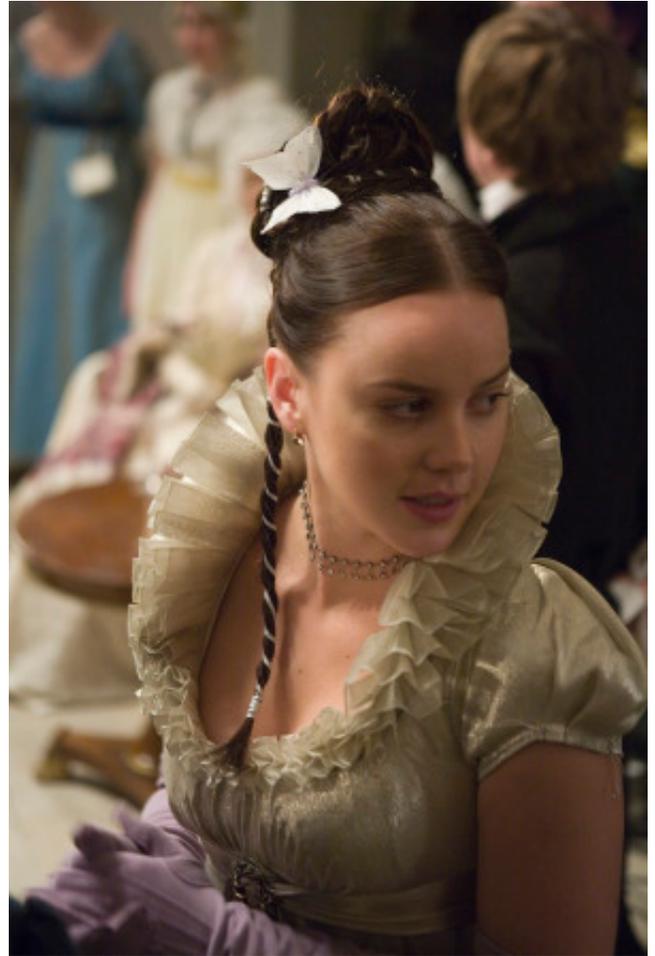
"Bright Star" takes its name from a poem written by the English romantic poet John Keats for his eighteen year old, next door neighbor Fanny Brawne. The movie recounts their tender, tragic

love affair.

Ben Wishaw plays Keats with the absolute conviction that the best movie acting takes place behind the eyes and he proves it. He conveys a young man in love, but also the easy, playful personality that Campion says remains evident in Keats' surviving letters to Fanny.

Kerry Fox, who starred in Campion's "An Angel at my Table," plays Fanny's mother both as comforter and perhaps misdirected moral compass, a protector responsible for her daughter's future which in her view cannot include a penniless poet. Paul Schneider ("The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford"), the cast's lone American, plays the thankless role of Keats' friend Brown, a bombastic, cynical, arrogant, intellectual thug, a writer-wannabe, who's jealous of Keats' increasingly serious interest in Fanny. He's good. You want to slap him upside the head.

Young Edie Martin, as Fanny's younger sister, "Toots," frequently steals the show in the way English child actors are particularly prone to. Sent on an errand to buy a copy of Keats' poetry, Toots tells the bookseller: "Fanny met the author. She wants to see if he's an idiot."



Abbie Cornish in "Bright Star" (c) Apparition 2009

Director Jane Campion ("The Piano) championed the project for years after reading Andrew Morton's book about Keats. As she put it: "I got to the part where he met Fanny and fell in love with their story. I was drawn to the pan and beauty and innocence of their love affair... They were so young; it was a true life Romeo and Juliet story, well-documented but one I had not known."

Campion, who stayed as close as possible to known history, admits she had to invent material in between the documented facts. Keats destroyed the letters Fanny gave him. Fortunately, Keats was a poet. He told posterity what he felt. The script is informed by his poetry and his

letters. Occasionally both Keats and Fanny recite his poetry onscreen. The effect is Shakespearean, and slyly, Campion permits her characters soliloquies.



Edie Martin in "Bright Star" (c) Apparition 2009

That being said, her direction is remarkably restrained. Perhaps it is in reaction to the power and force of the characters' feelings, but the restraint only increases the depth of emotion here. It certainly amplifies the social conventions and decorum of the early nineteenth century, an era Campion evokes down to the last dessert fork. The characters' love appears to go unconsummated, although eroticism is suggested with facial expression, with tone of voice, with body language that conveys genuine longing.

The photography in "Bright Star" is very carefully composed, the images deliberately geometric. Campion and cinematographer Greig Fraser work with a muted palette. The color scheme leans heavily to earth tones and grays, even to the costumes, other than Fanny's clothes, which are often red or pink. (Keats wears a lot of dark blue and when Fanny begins to wear it, the end is near.) For the most part, Campion avoids camera angles that would provide a view unattainable at the time. There are very few overhead shots, the exceptions being generally of intertwined, bare tree limbs, often forming complex patterns of ashen lace. Campion is entranced with bare branches, both an image of autumn's death and spring's expectancy. The movie was shot during a nine week period in March and April. Other than an extended sequence when the characters' love affair itself begins to openly bloom, much of the movie appears to take place in late fall or the dreariest part of early spring.

For those who slept through lit, it should be noted, without playing the spoiler, that Keats died young. Very young. The ending is haunting. "Bright Star" is a very adult drama about very young people which is deeply moving and that is something very rare on modern movie screens.

