

Critique

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Jane Campion Tackles Keats in *Bright Star*



Top of the Lake is Jane Campion's latest film, followed by *Bright Star* (2009) a movie on the poet John Keats. This is her first ever TV series in six parts; It is said Jane Campion's ambitious new TV project showcases the breath-taking beauty of Queenstown while exploring its more sinister side. It means "bleak view" of the other side of the coin. Though my intention here is to focus on her film *Bright Star*, based on Keats' love for Fanny Brawn, a legendary love narrative set in a piece of poem, a rare gem in cinematic tradition, *Bright Star* is the hidden story of the agile poet-artist.

Jane Campion, the noted New Zealand director, is now quite slow in selecting valid and positive subjects for her

film project. Meeting her was a wonderful experience; she does not directly lead. Instead, I had to lead the discussion on her illuminating works. Jane is always joyful to express her sentiments on any genre or niche film.

Bright Star seems to be her last best film so far. "For me, cinema is a probe through which I like to see and scan my society enmeshed in various microbes. It is not easy to make such kinds of films as the producers these days are not hunky-dory; they have gone critical over investment on cinema; it is a tough equation for us now."

The narrative of the new film *Top of the Lake* has the setting of an old small-town pub, noisy groups of wild-looking men

leaning against a wooden bar sipping tall brown bottles of beer. The racket dies down, and a shaggy-haired man in a long coat swaggers up to stand on a chair to address the motley crew. "This is a small town, and someone knows something. If you are that someone," he snarls in a thick Scottish accent, animalistic and fierce, "then you deserve to die." A caustic perception is sure to be pinned down. Meet Matt Mitcham, drug lord, small town gangster and father of 12-year-old Tui, who disappears after discovering that she is five months pregnant (father unknown) after attempting to take her own life.

Crafted well and made true to life by Peter Mullan, Matt Mitcham is one of the lead characters in Jane Campion's newest creation, *Top of the Lake*, a six-part TV series filmed in the stunning natural surroundings of Queenstown, Glenorchy and Moke Lake. Beginning this week on UKTV, it screened recently in its entirety at Sundance Film Festival and Berlin Film Festival to critical acclaim. The fictional name for the main town is *Laketop*, a corrupt place full of secrets - its pure environment a haunting contrast to the town's seedy underbelly, resulting in an atmosphere akin to cult classic *Twin Peaks*. Back on set in the pub, a grey long-haired Campion, eyes framed with black-rimmed glasses, approaches Mullan, relaxed but authoritative, to suggest a new take.

Campion, known for her experimental finesse and hailed by the *Top of the Lake* actors as somewhat of a directing prodigy, is on duty for half of the six episodes - the other three are directed by Australian Garth Davis. She also shared the script writing with her old film school pal, Gerard Lee, who she's teamed with in *Sweetie*. The story says Campion was

borne of this landscape, which she regularly visits from her home in Australia. "For me, when I go into that bush, I feel like I am in the most beautiful living room in the world. I roll around on the moss and feel completely healed by nature. I really treasure it, which is one reason I wanted to tell a story around it."

Then comes her memorable ode. *Bright Star*, nominally about Keats, is an addition to her portraits of ladies, women and girls. The film is three-dimensional and has no archaic contours. Since a poet's intimate love is the peg, it is enough for Jane Campion. Its centre is Fanny Brawne, regarded by many Keats biographers as a minx who trifled with the dying poet but seen by Campion as one of the 19th century's unsung female martyrs, able to express herself only through her needlework. "She had to be content," Campion said, "with a life made up of tiny things. Back then, women just waited for men and sewed or mended while they were doing so. I got myself into the mentality by learning to embroider pillow slips." The film's triumph is to make Fanny's demurely stoical routine more moving than the agony of the tubercular Keats, played with raw sensitivity by Ben Whishaw. Its study of thoughts that go unvoiced and desires that are never satisfied made me understand what Keats meant when he said he believed in "the holiness of the heart's affections".

The critic Chris Tookey evaluates it thus: *Bright Star* is New Zealander Jane Campion's comeback film, six years after her ill-advised venture into feminist serial-killing. This is an abortive effort. However, She's returned to the costume romance, which won her rave reviews for *The Piano* and polite ones for *The Portrait Of A Lady*. She then

makes *Bright Star*, and it records the serene love affair between teenager Fanny Brawne and sedate poet John Keats, her sometime next-door neighbour in the then unfashionable village of Hampstead, London. It is seen very much through Fanny's eyes as a chaste but heightened romance.

Timid affair: Ben Whishaw as Romantic poet John Keats and Abbie Cornish as his love, Fanny Brawne. The film is at its best in scenes that abandon themselves entirely to mirroring the heroine's emotions: her interior movement is registered. This is so poetically done. While she's lying on her bed waiting for Keats' next letter, she and John shyly lock fingers and, at the end, when she breaks down at the news of his death. In such pithy detail- the essence of the inner journey is reflected. We know that few directors understand female sensuality and suffering as well as *Campion*. Even in her first film, the controversial *Sweetie*, she used the camera skilfully to express the heroine's state of mind. In *The Piano*, where her heroine could not speak, *Campion* had little alternative but to allow the camera to do the talking and fructify the film.

Campion is wise to cast Abbie Cornish, a fine Australian actress who first impressed in her debut, *Somersault* (2004). Like Carey Mulligan in last week's *An Education*, she has no problem playing a girl ten years younger than herself. She, too, may feature in next year's Oscar nominees for Best Actress. It's a pity *Campion*'s screenplay doesn't create an entirely convincing character. *Campion* likes her leading characters to be arty, so Fanny here is not merely a seamstress but a cutting-edge designer. She is glass cutting diamond. This enables her to have a different, lovely

costume for almost every scene, despite living in genteel near-poverty. Chinks of poverty are often visible. The heretical thought kept cropping up in my mind that if she's that great a designer, she should tell her mother (Kerry Fox) to stop wearing hats that look like lampshades. Where the film falls, however, is with Keats. There's a fine line between fragile sensitivity and wimpishness, and Ben Whishaw tramples all over it. He is the drippiest British actor since the Merchant Ivory heyday of James Wilby, and he even managed to drain all the joie de vivre out of Sebastian Flyte in the recent film *Brideshead Revisited*.

It may be said he's no fun as Keats, even before he falls ill. He's dreadfully passionless even though he's monotonously intense. The one attempt at a light-hearted scene, where he entertains the Brawne family at Christmas with a highland fling, is embarrassing. It can't be right that, in a biopic of my favourite 19th-century poet, I was longing for him to die for most of the second hour.

Keats' friend and long-term victim of his sponging, the volatile Scotsman Charles Brown (Paul Schneider), has considerably more charisma, and his verbal jousting with Fanny is the high point of the first hour. He thinks she's ignorant and a waste of Keats' valuable time, two judgments with which it is hard entirely to disagree. Supporters of the film will point out that it's beautifully shot. I would reply that it is too beautiful. It's like gazing for two hours at a Farrow & Ball paint card, but without the excitement.

Thanks to Jane Austen's adaptations, we are familiar with men who can't marry because they are too poor and young women

who wish to marry for love but aren't allowed to. But in *Bright Star*, Fanny's family seems to do little except play ball, learn dance steps and luxuriate in meadows of wildflowers. They are, I'm afraid, silly and superficial, and it's hard to see why any of them constituted a muse to a great poet. The film reminded me of *Girl With A Pearl Earring*, and not only because in both pictures, but the cinematography also emulates the lighting of Vermeer. Both movies are suffocatingly slow, and a mass audience will never be involved with these characters' problems. Some will claim *Bright Star* is a directorial return to form. Still, too many of *Campion's* old weaknesses remain humourlessness, a lack of empathy for her male characters, a kind of precious, mystical feminism (don't get me started on Fanny's butterfly farm) and a heroine who is more needlessly spiky and passive-aggressive than *Campion* appreciates. The personality of Fanny Brawn is bitter-sweet.

The domestic interiors of *Bright Star* are proverbially monastic cells for the women imprisoned in them. Outside, the light-suffused landscapes seem to pulse. Its vibrancy is not only artistic but also propelling. "I was thinking of Monet's haystacks," said *Campion*. "They're just lumps, but they have the sun inside them; they vibrate. Images like that can't help but be moving; they're pictures of life, and you can feel it palpitating!" Jane *Campion* puts herself in line for her second *Palme d'Or* with this heartfelt and beautifully photographed story of the doomed love affair between John Keats and Fanny Brawne

According to critic Peter Bradshaw of the *Guardian*, it's 1818 in Hampstead Village

on the outskirts of London. Poet Charles Brown lives in one half of a house, and the Dilkes family live in the other half. Through their association with the Dilkes, the fatherless Brawne family know Mr Brown. The Brawne's eldest daughter, Fanny Brawne, and Mr Brown don't like each other. She thinks he's arrogant and rude, and he feels that she is pretentious, knowing only how to sew (admittedly well as she makes all her own fashionable clothes), flirt and give opinions on subjects she knows nothing about. Insecure struggling poet 'John Keats' comes to live with his friend, Mr Brown. Miss Brawne and Mr Keats have a mutual attraction to each other, a relationship which is slow to develop since Mr Brown does whatever he can to keep the two apart. But other obstacles face the couple, including their eventual overwhelming passion for each other clouding their view of what the other does, Mr Keats' struggling career offers.

In-person, *Campion* is neither amorphous nor goddess. The breeze derives from her quirky humour and the mercurial play of expression on her face; her greying hair and her black clothes suggest severity, but the woman herself is a riot of honest, flushed emotion. "I found myself sobbing," she said about reading John Keats's letters to Hampstead seamstress Fanny Brawne, on which *Bright Star* is based. A minute later, *Campion* was suppressing a scream as she remembered the delays on the film's set as wardrobe assistants fiddled with the Regency bows and hooked bodices worn by her cast: "It was like being in casualty; there was always another fashion emergency being wheeled in. I yelled, 'Just use Velcro!'" She then let loose a peal of hilarity that Keitel

might have called Olympian. "Oh, I love a tantrum," she admitted.

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Directing Abbie Cornish as Fanny, Campion played the mother who resigns herself to an offspring's newfound freedom and cuts the cord. "Abbie bonded with Fanny straight away, and if I disagreed about something, she'd insist she knew better. So I just said, 'OK, the character's yours.' I suppose some men would be allowed in the way I am, but Abbie told me she'd never had this kind of empathetic connection with a male director. For me, being a director is about watching, not about telling people what to do. Or maybe it's like being a mirror; if they didn't have me to look at, they wouldn't be able to put the make-up on." Campion's 14-year-old daughter, Alice, serves as her household muse, a touchstone of veracity like the

ingenious, trusting Toots; she was almost an unofficial consultant on Bright Star. "Keats didn't keep Fanny's letters, so when I was writing the script, I wondered how I'd be able to get her voice. Whenever unsure, I thought, 'How would Alice react?' She has the same personality, always flying off, fantastic emotional ups and downs, yet very tender and kind under it all. I'll show you; we should get her in here." She strode into the adjoining room to collar Alice, who accompanies her everywhere, a pretext probably, since I suspect Campion was missing her daughter after a separation of 15 minutes.

The three-year relationship between Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and Keats (Ben Whishaw) – she was 18 when they met in 1818, he was 23 – is one of the great love affairs of English literature. Still, it didn't become public until a decade after her death in 1865, when some of his letters to her were published. Using Andrew Motion's magisterial biography as her biographical source and Keats's poetry as her creative model, Campion has made what she calls "a ballad, a sort of story poem" about the relationship that begins with the beautiful, confident Fanny on her way with her young brother and sister and their mother to meet Keats and his devoted, well-off companion, poet Charles Brown, and ends with Fanny's terrible grief after receiving the news of his death in Rome in February 1821. Campion resists the temptation to follow Keats to Italy. Instead, Brown reads a letter from painter Joseph Severn who'd accompanied Keats on his journey. We see a brief, silent sequence of a coffin being carried down the Spanish Steps and a hearse driving off towards the Protestant Cemetery.

There's some rather clumsy exposition in the opening scenes when we're told about Keats's humble background, his parents' deaths, his sickly young brother Tom and another brother's emigration to the States. But this is uncharacteristic of a movie that subtly follows an Austenesque process as it moves from playful banter and underlying tension into the true love and mutual reliance that springs up when John and Fanny become next-door neighbours in Hampstead. The only thing standing between their two beds at that point is the thin wall dividing the semi-detached houses.

Campion is said to be a feminist filmmaker, the heroines of her films usually oppressed by insensitive families or husbands, as in her two previous excursions into the 19th century, *The Piano*, her most fully achieved work until *Bright Star*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, a fine but flawed film. So one becomes aware of an absence of what might be called assertiveness or aggression of a kind we might have expected from her. There are no conspicuous point-scoring sexual politics at work in *Bright Star* beyond the apparent recognition that women at that time were restricted in their social lives.

This is primarily confined to the admirably handled conflict between Brawne and Brown. Brown, a conventional misogynist, regards women as objects for exploitation, display or distant adoration and believes it his duty to

protect the vulnerable Keats from the distraction Fanny constitutes. He represents a different kind of love from the one Keats offers and ends up making a servant girl pregnant and marrying her without any intention of remaining faithful. He also lets down Keats, first by no longer being able to provide financial support, then by finding excuses for not going with him to Italy. Fanny comes into Keats's orbit by wanting to comfort his ailing brother Tom and her desire to understand his poetry. She is not seeking to become his muse (though she does) and isn't jealous of him (and indeed, there's little in the way of professional success or social attainment to be jealous of).

It is the man and his work that attracts her. As played by Ben Whishaw, he's an engaging figure: friendly but socially awkward, proud but not arrogant, a dreamer but not dreamy, and curiously vigorous despite tuberculosis that often drags him down and will soon kill him. We inevitably miss the more prominent social vision that Motion's biography reveals. Not surprisingly, Mrs Brawne (Kerry Fox) thinks Keats is a hopeless match for her daughter, but she is a kindly, thoughtful person. She is prepared, for a mixture of reasons, for her daughter to become engaged, if only secretly.

Bright Star, after all, despite infirmity, stays on and refuses to fade out.