

BEN WHISHAW

Bright Star, the new film from acclaimed film director Jane Campion is a tenderhearted rumination on the romance between the great Romantic poet John Keats and his mistress Fanny Brawne. The film shares its name with a poem Keats wrote for Brawne during their tumultuous relationship, which lasted until the bard's untimely death from tuberculosis at the age of 25.

The union scandalised pre- Victorian society as the lovers conducted their affair out of wedlock, flouting the stringent social mores of the time. Poverty and ill health prevented them from taking formal vows, separating the couple even as Keats lay on his deathbed in a foreign country. Their love formed the basis for much of Keats' later work and endures in his poems, letters and biographies.

Campion, who also wrote the screenplay, has crafted a story that focuses on the innocence and inherent poeticism of young love. Eschewing a moral commentary of their relationship, the film instead hones in on the agony and the ecstasy of forbidden love. With exquisite attention to detail, Bright Star is achingly period in the visual sense yet is tempered with understated performances from its leads Abbie Cornish - in a breakthrough role - and Ben Whishaw, a talented young actor who has built up an impressive body of work in the past few years.

Last seen playing Lord Sebastian Flyte in a long film awaited adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, Whishaw is a working actor in the truest sense; while he was brilliant as a young man who is incarcerated for murder in the BBC five-part series Criminal Justice, he is as comfortable performing in radio play productions as he is on the stage, his first love.

Despite his rising star, Whishaw is somewhat wistful about his days at the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London: "I went there when I was 19 - it was a three-year course, really intense. I loved it as much as anything because it gave me the chance to be in London and to meet new people and kind of live a bit. When I look back on it now I think, in some ways, that was the most valuable part of the experience."

Growing up in provincial England, Whishaw showed an interest in the performing arts from an early age. While he now downplays his time spent in youth theatre as "a hobby, something I did at weekends and in the holidays", by the time he was in high school Whishaw was already heavily committed to the Big Spirit theatre group. In 2005 he starred in an adaptation of a Primo Levi novel, If This Was a Man, which was staged at the Edinburgh Festival with the company.

By this time, people were starting to take notice of Whishaw's prodigious talent. He retained the services of an agent and was cast in his first film at the age of 17. "I did a film called *The Trench*," he recalls "a film that hardly anyone would have seen. It was a feature by the English writer William Boyd. He wrote and directed it." While the film may not have been a box office success, Boyd himself has described Whishaw's small role as a young soldier in the First World War as "astonishingly good".

After finishing high school, other parts in film and television followed, however Whishaw became frustrated; after such a promising start his career looked to be in danger of stalling. He attempted a fine arts degree yet found himself drifting back to his vocation. At the age of 19, Whishaw made an inspired choice for someone who had already achieved a modicum of success; he applied for and was accepted into drama school.

"I always wanted to do theatre really, much more than I wanted to be in film," he explains. "That was why I wanted to go to RADA, because I felt like if you wanted to be in theatre, you had to be properly trained to do it. So I went and studied, and when I left my mission was to do theatre – which is what I did for a year or something after I left college".

Since graduating from that highly venerated institution in 2003, Whishaw has experienced a career trajectory that is nothing short of ascendant. He was chosen by celebrated theatre director Sir Trevor Nunn to play Hamlet in his production at the Old Vic in 2004, a role that garnered him glowing reviews and, ironically, paved the way for more film and television roles.

Fans of arch satirist Chris Morris may also recognize him from the outré Channel 4 television series *Nathan Barley* as the eternal whipping boy Pingu: "It's got a little cult following that show. It's always nice when I talk to people who have seen it I loved doing that. I love Chris Morris," enthuses Whishaw "I was playing Hamlet in the evening at the time and filming *Nathan Barley* during the day – it was a very schizophrenic period".

His performance in Tom Twyker's *Perfume*, another long awaited adaptation, this time from author Patrick Suskind, was notable in its intensity. In a film where the main protagonist is completely at the mercy of his olfactory sense, almost to the exclusion of all others, Whishaw had minimal dialogue yet made a powerful impression on the viewer. Here was an actor who had the presence and charisma to pull off one of literature's most curious and illustrious characters.

Not by design, Whishaw maintains, he has also played two of rock music's most enigmatic characters – Keith Richards in 2005's *Stoned*,

and Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes' conceptual biopic *I'm Not There*. "I love music, it's really an important thing to me" states Whishaw. "I would say that in my life, I need music much more than I need films or theatre. I listen to music every day. For me it's a really important thing. But it's not something I can do, I can't play an instrument or read music – I don't have any great facility for it but I love it and I am really interested in it. Those parts happened to come along, it was a completely random thing, and I didn't seek them out or anything. It was a happy coincidence because I love those musicians."

For the part of John Keats in *Bright Star*, Campion approached Whishaw directly: "She sent me the script and a letter saying that she'd seen a film I'd done and if I were interested, would I be willing to meet with her and audition. We sort of had an email conversation - back and forth – and then we finally met." Whishaw remembers watching *The Piano* with his aunt when he was 13, and taking himself off to see *Holy Smoke* (two of Campion's most well known films) at the cinema when it was released.

He was already an ardent admirer of her work. "I hadn't formed many attachments to film directors really, because I was interested in theatre, but she was one of those filmmakers that I connected with. So it was amazing when I got a script. I was incredibly excited by the prospect of it."

"She's just got amazing way of seeing right inside people and an intuition for what they might have inside them that they haven't discovered yet, haven't released yet. Her instincts are really acute – she's a very instinctive person, very in touch with those things."

Campion and the key cast convened for a four-week rehearsal period, to work on the characters and scenes before shooting started. It wasn't without its difficult moments. "Jane seemed to be quite hard to please. She didn't ever seem to be happy with what we were doing and she was kind of scrunching up her face and I could see that she wasn't really feeling it," says Whishaw. "She encouraged us not to try so hard in a way because she could see that we were all trying very hard and acting very hard and she didn't want that. She wanted us just to be – just to be the characters and be present in the moment."

Keats, aside from his tremendous poetic aptitude, was also something of a philosopher. His theory of Negative Capability – a concept that has since captured the imagination of many – was introduced in a letter to his brothers dated 1817, in which he stated, "...negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Campion herself saw the potential in Keats' premise as a device for her cast and encouraged her actors to be mindful of this hypothesis when approaching their roles. Whishaw muses: "We realized that this idea that Keats coined was really a useful one for us in the way we worked: to be present in the mystery, if you like."

Keats and Brawne were lovers in the early 1800s, and while *Bright Star* is highly stylised, the actors performances tend towards the natural. This gives the film, despite its careful attention to the detail of the period, a surprisingly modern feel. "That's what Jane wanted," agrees Whishaw "Whenever it sounded like we were talking in some period way she'd stop us, she wanted it just to be natural. Just to be everyday. And I think that gives the film a kind of intimacy that allows people in."

As the writer, as well as the director, Campion also had a very clear idea of how she wanted to portray the relationship. Brawne was derided during her involvement with Keats – fraternising with a man outside of the bounds of an official betrothal was severely frowned upon – Keats himself even went so far as to call her a minx, though it was surely in a playful sense. Their liaison was fraught with the impossibility of it being actualised; by Keats' inability to support her financially, and by his terminal illness. However a passionate bond existed between them, which developed into delicate and private love, which is what Campion chose to highlight in her dramatisation of their affair.

"I think that Jane was interested in exploring a purity about people and that was what she wanted to focus on, the way people relate to each other, to explore the possibility of that purity," clarifies Whishaw. "I don't think it's sentimentalised in the least, far from it, but I think she was more interested in the tenderness that existed, that perhaps it was stronger than anything else that may have been a part of their relationship."

"There was a really jealous, exceptionally angry side to Keats as expressed in his letters which we don't go into so much in the film." He continues. "Any film about a real person is going to be about a take, an angle, and I think the stronger that take is, the better really. It's difficult to do justice to someone's life, particularly someone like John Keats whose life is so well documented. We know so much about him through his letters and his poems. I think that Jane's angle, through the eyes of Fanny, is a really inspired one."

Running parallel to the romantic relationship with Brawne is Keats' friendship with Charles Brown, a former merchant and lesser writer who became an ally, benefactor, caregiver and champion of the struggling poet. It was while lodging with Brown that Keats initially made

Brawne's acquaintance. "I think it's a really interesting relationship, just because they seem so different," observes Wishaw. "I think it was hard for other people around Keats, maybe hard for people watching the film to understand what the two men got from each other. I think in a sense that Keats was everything that Charles Brown wasn't and vice versa. They completed each other in some ways. I like that it was a relationship that didn't seem to make a lot of sense, but was one that worked for them both. It was like Brown felt he was in the presence of a writer of superior ability, that Keats was just on another plane really. Charles Brown is presented in Jane's script as very earth bound whereas Keats is in the ether somewhere."

Wishaw, who has a self-admitted tendency to become consumed with his work, quickly became fascinated with Keats and the world he lived in. "I think that whole period, the Romantic period, was really interesting as it was a reaction was against industrialisation and dehumanisation. The Romantics put people and feelings back at the centre of life, which I really liked the idea of so I read quite widely – all his poems and letters but also several biographies and criticism of his work and other poets who were writing at the time, or just before, because I was so interested."

Ultimately, Wishaw was profoundly moved by the experience of playing the doomed poet. Especially seeing as it afforded him the opportunity to work with Campion. "I think it was a real turning point in my life – she's had a really, really, really big effect on me – on my life and my work. I can't speak too highly of her. I love her." When we speak, he's on the way to stay at her retreat in New Zealand's South Island. It isn't difficult to imagine that she returns his affection.

John Keats and Fanny Brawne – their romance was unequivocally a product of their time. The conversation with Wishaw ends with a musing over the impossibilities of a relationship, such as the one they had, existing in the modern world, as we know it. "It would have taken a month, at least, for the letter to travel from Rome to Hampstead after Keats' death," says Wishaw. How Brawne must have suffered – in this day and age someone would have instantly sent her an email or a text message with the bad news. "I know, so unromantic," sighs Wishaw, said like a true Romantic.