

FILM REVIEW



Poetic justice

Keats' brief romance with Fanny Brawne gets the treatment it so richly deserves in 'Bright Star'

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Costume drama is a perilous gold mine of clichés, but with *Bright Star* Australian director Jane Campion seems to have hit the vein that she had been searching for in *The Piano* (1993). Intense and atmospheric, it avoids the pitfalls of fancy dress and transports the audience to another world, whose logic is not of this one.

It takes as its starting point the poet John Keats and his meeting with, quite literally, the girl next door, Fanny Brawne. What follows is a brief moment of romance, which in our historical knowledge of its transience is like a haiku. Keats died at age 25 having written some of the best-known and best-loved poems of the English Romantic movement.

Biopics, especially those of writers, have a tendency to trip themselves up with voice-overs taken from their written works, which are crowded into the narrative. Campion deals with the problem by making *Bright Star* itself an ode of sorts, with an elusive texture full of fleeting hints of emotion hidden behind a formal exterior of early 19th-century English life.

In between meeting and parting forever, Fanny learns a little about poetry, and Keats finds a muse who is almost in every way different from what one might expect.

For Fanny is a no-nonsense type of girl who comes of a good, but not particularly wealthy family, who has a positive opinion of her own talents and the place in the world and esteem of others that this entitles her. She is a skilled seamstress with aspirations to being a fashion designer, and she has no qualms about telling Keats, who is a virtual pauper living on the charity of friends and admirers, that it is at least a skill with which she can make a living.

The part of Fanny Brawne is well conceived and executed by Abbie Cornish, who produces a performance of magnificent restraint, holding behind her very correct deportment and speech a veritable flood of passion. There are no naked bodies and bodice-ripping scenes beyond the abilities of Ben Whishaw's Keats, who seems barely to have strength enough to force his way through a field of daffodils.

In a movie industry that harps almost manically on eroticism,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY



Campion does not take the easy route of having her lead actors throwing themselves into each other's arms at every opportunity. She allows them to grow into love, so that when that love becomes an accomplished fact, the impossibility of any kind of union is all the more heartbreaking. "Attachment is such a difficult thing to undo," says Mrs Dilke, Keats' landlady, who is full of kindness and good sense, shaking her head over an affair that she knows can only end badly for all involved.

Although propriety is observed, Campion does not let us forget that these are flesh-and-blood beings

who value physical intimacy. The closest that *Bright Star* gets to a bedroom scene is a flirtatious exchange in which Fanny suggests that Keats might be sleeping in the bed she at one time used. It is just a whiff of sexuality, but in Campion's hands, it is potent stuff.

The passionate relationship is leavened by a skillful performance by Paul Schneider as Charles Armitage Brown, Keats' friend, fellow poet and champion. He first dismisses Fanny, then flirts with her, then tries, in his own way, to separate the two. His love of Keats is a rough and earthy thing, but his admiration of the poetry is sincere, and he resents Fanny's intrusion into their relationship.

This trio is supported by a fine ensemble cast, most notably Kerry Fox as Fanny's mother, and some fine camera work that by turns

lingers over an almost impossibly beautiful English countryside and captures the claustrophobic spaces of the rented house in Hampstead shared by Keats, Brown and the Brawne family.

Bright Star is a movie that allows love its mystery. Campion has captured the mood of Keats' poetry, its elegiac sorrow and deep passion, and filtered it through into a story that manages to link real people with the expression of transcendent emotion without ever compromising their flesh-and-bone humanity.

Film Notes

BRIGHT STAR

DIRECTED BY:
JANE CAMPION

STARRING:
BEN WHISHAW (JOHN KEATS),
ABBIE CORNISH (FRANCES
'FANNY' BRAWNE), KERRY FOX
(MRS BRAWNE), PAUL SCHNEIDER
(CHARLES ARMITAGE BROWN),
EDIE MARTIN (MARGARET 'TOOTS'
BRAWNE), THOMAS SANGSTER
(SAMUEL BRAWNE)

RUNNING TIME:
119 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

We are who we are

'Phoebe in Wonderland' sensitively probes the perils of parenthood and how kids learn to live with each other

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

In a week overloaded with releases for children, the small three-feature festival at SPOT titled Children and the World Film Festival might easily get overlooked given both its size and also the rather peculiar selection of its lineup.

This would be a pity if it means missing out on *Phoebe in Wonderland*, which is packaged together with *Small Voices* (2008), a documentary that follows the lives of post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian children struggling to survive on the aid of the Cambodian Children's Fund, and *8*, a portmanteau movie with segments by eight directors (including heavy hitters such as Jane Campion, Gus van Sant and Wim Wenders) to address aspects of the G8 Millennium Development Goals.

The latter two films both have clearly defined political agendas that are obvious from the moment the projector starts to roll. *Phoebe in Wonderland* is a mainstream feature film, which might be described as drama or quirky comedy, but it also deals specifically with an "issue," Tourette's syndrome, which is the reason it has been included in a program with a social agenda.

In the case of *Phoebe in Wonderland*, this somewhat over-developed concern with social relevance mars what is otherwise a delightful and thought-provoking little film that provides sensitive portraits of parents learning about living with children, and children learning to live with each other.



Elle Fanning stars in *Phoebe in Wonderland*, directed by Daniel Barnz.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SKY DIGI ENTERTAINMENT

Phoebe is a little girl with a highly developed fantasy life and some issues with self-control. She is played by Elle Fanning, Dakota Fanning's younger sister, who gives the role considerable depth with a mix of assurance and vulnerability. Phoebe is a lovely child, but one not without rough edges.

It is these rough edges that make life so hard for her intensely caring parents. Felicity Huffman puts in a super performance as the committed, informed yet at times clueless mother, caught in the clutches of the almost schizophrenic demands of modern parenting.

The tensions between discipline and creativity, freedom and willfulness, are well portrayed,

both from a child's and an adult's point of view.

Phoebe's problems are partially resolved when she throws herself into the school play, *Alice in Wonderland*, which is being produced by the school's drama teacher, Miss Dodger (Patricia Clarkson), an adult who is sensitive to the needs of children but is not beyond being misled by them either. The stage play, and the assumption of various *Wonderland* characters by parents, teachers and of course the attending psychologist who is brought in to treat Phoebe (who appears occasionally as Humpty Dumpty), provide an absurdist gloss on the action.

Fanning holds things together in a demanding role, revealing the

emotional turmoil of childhood without hogging the action and serving as a sounding board for a variety of adult responses to her behavior. Another child actor who does a star turn is Ian Colletti, who plays Jamie, the boy who wants to play the Queen of Hearts. The gay issue is touched on lightly, with just enough to simply say that we must be who we are.

Unfortunately, the filmmakers do not seem confident enough to avoid labeling Phoebe's condition, which emerges as Tourette's syndrome. The subtle dance of ideas that the film raised at the beginning grinds to a standstill, which is a thoroughly unsatisfactory way of tying off the story. It's almost as if three-

quarters of the way through making the film, the director thought he might not have got his point across, and suddenly had to reach for the loud-hailer.

NOTE: Ten percent of ticket revenue from *Phoebe in Wonderland* will be donated to the Taiwan Tourette Family Association. *Phoebe in Wonderland* is part of a mini film festival screening at SPOT — Taipei Film House (台北光點), 18 Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號). The festival includes *Small Voices* and *8*. Schedule times can be found at www.spot.org.tw.

Film Notes

PHOEBE IN WONDERLAND

DIRECTED BY:
DANIEL BARNZ

STARRING:
FELICITY HUFFMAN (HILLARY LICHTEN), ELLE FANNING (PHOEBE LICHTEN), PATRICIA CLARKSON (MISS DODGER), BILL PULLMAN (PETER LICHTEN), BAILEE MADISON (OLIVIA LICHTEN), CAMPBELL SCOTT (PRINCIPAL DAVIS), IAN COLLETTI (JAMIE)

RUNNING TIME:
96 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Taiwan International Children's Film Festival

Organized by Taiwan's Public Television Service Foundation, the TICFF, now in its fourth edition, combines films about children, for children, and even a Kids as Directors segment that puts children at the helm. The opening films are *Bye-Bye Morakot*, a four-part documentary which chronicles the young victims of the typhoon that caused extensive damage in Taiwan in August last year, and *Mai Mai Miracle*, a Japanese animated story about a child living in Japan's Heian period. The festival closes with the Asian premiere of *Little Nicholas*, a French comedy about children that will also be getting a mainstream cinema release after the TICFF ends. In between there's a huge range of films for every taste; visit www.ticff.org.tw/schedule.html for the full schedule. NT\$50 tickets are available through ERA ticketing or at the two screening venues, Eslite Xinyi Store (信誼信義店) and Vie Show Cinema, Xinyi District (信義威秀影城). Runs until Sunday.



Clash of the Titans

In its relentless search for material, Hollywood has rediscovered the treasure trove of Greek mythology and settled on the story of Perseus for this fantasy action adventure starring Sam Worthington as the demigod Perseus, Ralph Fiennes as Hades, god of the underworld (and chief villain), and Liam Neeson as Zeus, chief god of the heavens. The story has been given the full Hollywood treatment, including the belated addition of 3D to some scenes to provide maximum visual bang. It is a remake of the 1981 film of the same name, and the improvements in CGI and other technologies make this version a vast improvement, with the trailer sporting some amazing effects. Depending on one's taste, this may or may not make up for the overwrought acting and simple-minded plot.



Arthur and the Revenge of Maltazard

Luc Besson, who has both director and writer credits on this children's adventure animation, enjoys pushing the boundaries of what it means to be commercial. This little franchise began life with *Arthur and the Minimoys* in 2006, when 10-year-old Arthur discovers a race of cute (if you like glam punk) plastic doll figures, who eventually help him prevent his grandfather's house being demolished by nefarious real estate interests. This time the Minimoys are in trouble, so Arthur plunges back into his fantasy world to save them. Features an improbable cast of voices that range from Lou Reed and Snoop Dogg to Mia Farrow and Freddie Highmore. A third installment, *Arthur and the Two Worlds War*, has already had its European release and will doubtless be coming to these shores soon.



Future X-Cops

Directed by Wong Jing (王晶) and featuring A-list eye candy Barbie Hsu (徐熙媛) and Fan Bing-bing (范冰冰) and starring Andy Lau (劉德華), *Future X-Cops* is by the standards of Hong Kong cinema a mega-buck prestige release. Even so, some of the costumes manage to look like *RoboCop* hand-me-downs, and the plot, which features a futuristic super-cop going back in time to save a scientist who could change the world, is not exactly new. Big oil are the bad guys, and they get to use cyborg assassins. And isn't Lau, who is pushing 50, getting a bit old for these action roles? With the almost simultaneous release of his cop shop comedy romance *Beauty on Duty* (美麗密令) in China, Director Wong Jin is covering all the bases.



Old Partner

A South Korean documentary by Lee Chung-ryoul that explores the three-corned relationship between an elderly farmer, his wife and their ox, an ancient creature who has shared their lives for nearly 30 years. The film was intended as a dedication to the rural way of life that is gradually passing away. A favored topic of conversation by the couple is speculating on which of the three will die first. The willingness of the director to linger without sentimentality over the effects of age and long years of backbreaking labor, making of it something akin to happiness, won the film a nomination in the World Cinema category of the Sundance Film Festival.

