

Becoming Jane

In the mid-to-late 1990's, there was a spurt of Jane Austen fever in the land, spurred principally by a television mini-series (made for the American A & E network) of her most famous novel, "Pride and Prejudice." The production was not only well-crafted, but it introduced to many a smoldering Colin Firth as Darcy, who made the hearts of any number of girls (and women) flutter. In the same year as that production—1995—also appeared fine versions of two other Austen novels, "Sense and Sensibility" and "Persuasion."

Even more intriguing, 1995 also saw a sprightly updating of Austen's "Emma" in the form of the smart teen movie comedy *Clueless*, which made Alicia Silverstone a star. An appropriate period version of *Emma* then appeared in 1996 (with Gwyneth Paltrow in the lead), and 1999 brought director's Patricia Rozema's smart version of *Mansfield Park*. In that spate of filmic Austeniana, only her novel "Northanger Abbey" did not make it to the screen. It can only be hoped that at least some moviegoers were driven back to the books themselves by this flurry of adaptations.

After a Jane Austen cinematic breather (another version of "Pride and Prejudice" reached the screen in 2005), we now have *Becoming Jane*, a new fiction film from England which depicts how the young Jane was formed as a writer and a woman. It turns out to be a captivating and touching film, mostly because its makers, led by director Julian Jarrold (*Kinky Boots*), have confected out of Jane's early life a new addition to the Austen genre

The story treats Jane (Anne Hathaway) in her twenties at the end of the 18th Century, an aspiring writer producing verses and readings for her admiring family, which includes her pastor father (James Cromwell), her down-to-earth mother (Julie Walters), and her sweet sister Cassandra (Anna Maxwell Martin), among others. She can hardly, of course, **be** a writer, so her future must be tied up with an appropriate marriage "match." The Austen's imperious neighbor in provincial Hampshire, Lady Gresham (Maggie Smith), has a moneyed nephew Wisley (Laurence Fox) to offer, but Jane finds the man a bit of a stick. She is far more intrigued—nay, even attracted—to a rather wild import to the country from London, the spirited, but impecunious Irishman Tom LeFroy (James McAvoy), whose only hope for an inheritance comes from his uncle, the haughty Judge Langlois (Ian Richardson).

That setting just described indicates just how cleverly screenwriters Kevin Hood and Sarah Williams have recreated a Jane-Austen-like plot and imposed it upon a re-imagined life story of that very writer. The exchanges, the dalliances, the sparks of intellect, and, especially, the balance an Englishwoman of 1800 must strike between affection and money, between accepted decency and possibly penurious love—fill out this story which seems right from the Jane Austen playbook. Some lines, like one from Mrs. Austen—"Affection is desirable. Money is absolutely indispensable!"—seem literally stolen from the writer (perhaps they were!). Points are well made, too, about the grim limitations on women at the time, and how the life of their minds was commonly devalued.,

such as when, for example, Lady Gresham learns that Jane has been writing, only to retort: "Can anything be done about it?"

That the story doesn't quite turn out as neatly as does an actual Austen romance (as Jane herself says: "My characters shall have, after a little trouble, all that they desire") does not detract from a satisfying, and roughly historically accurate, ending. Perhaps the best thing one can say about *Becoming Jane* is that it has the genuine feeling of a seventh finished Austen novel.

The use of a "hot" American talent like Anne Hathaway (*The Devil Wears Prada*, *Brokeback Mountain*) as the lead in a quintessentially English picture parallels earlier such efforts, like Paltrow in *Emma* cited above or Rene Zellweger as the British Bridget Jones, which castings could be seen as dutifully bowing to the box office. So be it, yet Hathaway—all of 24—displays a fluidity of accent from the first scene and backs it up with a luminous yet feisty presence that simply wins you over. The only question might be why someone with Hathaway's striking brunette looks doesn't have a batch of eager suitors falling all over her—even in Hampshire.

Hathaway is seconded nicely by McAvoy (co-star of last year's *The Last King of Scotland*) whose smoldering looks and piercing eyes puts one in mind of Russell Crowe's younger brother. He gives off the appropriate vibes of both an urban sophisticate and a moony swain, a fellow in love who has to ever calculate his financial fate. The other veteran cast members—the avuncular Cromwell, the barking Walters, and the gorgon-like Maggie Smith—turn out their character roles effortlessly.

The whole of *Becoming Jane* is beautifully shot in beautiful Ireland, and most becoming it all is, indeed. You could put this kind of film down by saying it's just another Brit-style "Masterpiece Theater" episode, but..."Masterpiece Theater," oddly enough, hasn't featured any Jane Austen for years. (*"Becoming Jane" is rated "PG."*)

(August 2007)