

The Piano: A feminist classic? 25 years on it doesn't look like it

THE IRISH TIMES 10/6/2020

Review: In Jane Campion's Oscar-winning screenplay the female lead character is left to choose the lesser of two evils, both rapists

Tara Brady

In the mid-19th century, Scottish woman Ada McGrath (Hunter) is sold by her father into marriage to a New Zealand frontiersman named Alisdair Stewart (Neill). Ada is mute but she expresses herself by playing the piano and through sign language, with her young daughter, Flora (Paquin), acting as translator.

Travelling with a Maori crew and Baines (Keitel) – an old sailor who has “gone native” enough to have facial tattoos – her husband comes to collect Ada and Flora but refuses to transport Ada's piano back to his house. The instrument is instead purchased by Baines, who strikes a deal with Ada: she can earn her piano back one key at a time, by playing at his home while he does “things he likes”.

Slowly Ada warms to her blackmailer, in stark contrast to her chilly marital relations at home.

In 1993 Jane Campion's *The Piano* was heralded as a feminist text and with good reason. The film marked the first occasion when a female film director won the Palme d'Or at Cannes and the second occasion when a female was nominated for best director at the Academy Awards.

As with Campion's previous features, *Sweetie* and *An Angel at My Table*, *The Piano* was a female-centred story with several interesting female secondary characters. Twenty-five years later and it's a far more complicated conversation.

Campion herself did not think that she was fashioning a feminist classic. Speaking to *Interview* magazine in 1992 while she was making the film, she said: “I don't belong to any clubs, and I dislike club mentality of any kind, even feminism – although I do relate to the purpose and point of feminism.”

Sex or art?

Ada may survive attempted rape, sexual blackmail and extreme domestic violence, but the Oscar-winning screenplay leaves her to choose between her cold, rapey husband, and her hot, bothered, rapey suitor. There is no sense of sisterhood between the film's female characters; indeed, Ada's own daughter betrays her.

There is also the troubling notion that Ada has to choose between sex and art. The feminist author Bell Hooks has argued that *The Piano* falls short of being a feminist film because it advances the sexist assumption that heterosexual women will give up artistic practice to find “true love”.

Against this, Ada's sexual and romantic acceptance of Baines happens after he renounces the patriarchal authority that allowed him to sexually coerce her. Their arrangement, he tells her, "is making you a whore, and me wretched".

It's intriguing to consider what the film might have looked like had Sigourney Weaver, Campion's first choice for Ada, been available.

But Holly Hunter's tiny frame, which seems to grow in step with Ada's assertiveness and Michael Nyman's swelling score, work awfully well. Her gothic heroine – initially conceived as a nemesis for Bluebeard – is complemented by Stuart Dryburgh's dark cinematography and gaspingly restrictive widowy petticoats.