

Hollywood, Etc.: A Brit outlook for Knightley

by David_Elliott

When Keira Knightley phones, it seems an ear jingle from Britannia herself. The spring-loaded gush of rushing syllables announces: London calling!

KEIRA KNIGHTLEY - Still-quite-young Keira Knightley, 22, steps into her deepest adult role in the drama 'Atonement.' CNS Photo courtesy of Alex Bailey. What would famed linguist Henry Higgins of "My Fair Lady" make of Knightley's accent? Surely, that she was born in Teddington, Middlesex, England.

And the old fox would intuit from the zest of her confidence that she is the child of actors. And that TV (since age 7), stage (a bit later) and movies (since '95) have honed the lass of 22 into a vessel of such brimming vim that a Higgins makeover will not be needed (alas, director Trevor Nunn snipped off Keira's '06 hope to do Eliza Doolittle in "Lady").

As surplus compensation, "Atonement" is the most deeply adult role of Knightley's young life. Cecilia, the flirty snob who becomes a lover, unstarched by her merging of hearts with James McAvoy's lesser-born Robbie, takes Knightley into Ian McEwan's "metafictional" novel set in the verge and first gasp of World War II.

"I am afraid the book is one I bought and did not get around to reading," admits Knightley, who makes this sound like a merrily shared secret. "I did read it long after the script arrived. When I did, I just sobbed and sobbed and sobbed."

Dried-out, she was ripe to help transfer the freighted book to film, though "so many people said they couldn't imagine how it could be done. So much is internal monologue. You see the story from each character's point of view. When they make horrendous mistakes, you wonder why they are doing it."

Why she did this, with the keen appetite that led her surging from a '96 TV princess to queenly Guinevere ("King Arthur"), from a TV Rose in "Oliver Twist" to minor work that year ('99) in a "Star Wars" epic, from lavish duds ("Domino," "The Jacket") to smash turns as a soccer gal ("Bend It Like Beckham") and fem-macho Elizabeth Swann in three "Pirates of the Caribbean" hits, can be summed in a name: Joe Wright, director.

Wright led Keira to her previously most praised, and Oscar-nominated, role, as Elizabeth in the 2005 "Pride & Prejudice." She says of him:

"Joe is absolutely the kind of talent who doesn't come 'round every day. When a director like him asks you, you just say yes. He is obviously a friend, and he is the kind that just clicked, which is very rare."

With adapter Christopher Hampton, Wright piloted the bright beauty through the tides of Cecilia, a type of English high-born girl bursting into womanhood that the non-aristo Knightley knows well.

"I didn't find her a vast challenge. I think she is a good person, at heart. Yes, she is spoiled and bratty and knows it and can't stop. She is also repressed in country society, very stiff-upper-lip, and has little idea what emotions (are) because she has no language for them. But underneath she is bubbling and alive, and while she partly hates Robbie and he gets pissed off by her, they are so clearly in love from the start."

Knightley had "long been fascinated by the period. We had historians come and talk to us about it. A strange time. Most people didn't really believe war would come - they thought the 1914-'18 war ended all that - so they just drifted into disaster."

Context informs an actor's specific text, how to move and talk in a society. "Their speech," she notes, with a Higgins snap, "is fascinating from a British point of view. That accent is lost, gone with my parents' generation. You just don't hear it now. I watched 'Brief Encounter' (1946), and hearing Celia Johnson in that was a huge help. Today we're much slower talkers, so many more pauses. I don't much like pauses myself!"

(Yes, Keira, we can tell).

Mention that Cecilia has emotive kinship with Cathy of "Wuthering Heights," and Knightley sparkles without a pause. "One of my favorite books! Completely love it! Talk about a spoiled bitch, that Cathy. I am quite drawn to people who behave badly."

Career-wise, and in actorly growth, she behaves well. It's a stunner to realize that Knightley, a comer it seems almost over-nightly (despite many years of work), was a dyslexic girl who first hated to read and was not shaped by British acting schools.

"I didn't have any formal training. But I had the wonderful informal training of being born to an actor and a director, who pointed the way. And I have been very fortunate. You know, so many people thought 'Bend It Like Beckham' wouldn't do well. It seemed a sort of joke about girls playing soccer, and it was a huge thing all over the world.

"Same with the 'Pirates' films, not taken seriously at first. I have to admit I haven't yet seen the one from last summer."

She simply plans "to change, to keep interested. Why else bother?"

For 2008, that brings her in "The Duchess" with Ralph Fiennes, "about Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, an ancestor of Princess Diana, a big political hostess of the Whig party in the 1780s. I just love period pictures, the way you can escape into a world, peel away from this one into a new place. Such fun!"

Fun in depth came in watching Vanessa Redgrave make a small role profound in "Atonement," which was "very fortunate though I have no scenes with her. She is amazing. That last shot is one continuous moment that is simply heartbreaking. Many actors would have tried to make it very emotional. She just pared it down to naked truth."

Similarly, the great Dunkirk war sequence "was astonishing when I saw it. James (McAvoy) is so amazing there with his pal in the war, that wonderful actor Danny Mays, it's almost a sort of love scene. You know, the huge Steadicam tracking shot was sort of last-minute. They were running out of time and had to get it all in one swoop, yet Joe (Wright) took time to make every actor feel important. The canvas of story is completely painted."

She, Wright and McAvoy may get Oscar bids - something that surpasses being named the promo face of Chanel's scent Mademoiselle, or even being named the second sexiest voice (No. 1: Sean Connery) by the Royal National Institute for the Blind. Mention it and she burbles trans-Atlantically:

"My, I didn't even know about that one. Seems I have a parallel career. Isn't that marvelous!"

Yes, and Knightley so.

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