



The Piano (NZL-1993) (117 minutes).

Eden Court Playhouse Cinema: 7:15pm, Tues 18th & 11:15am, Wed 19th September.

Written and directed by Jane Campion; photographed by Stuart Dryburgh; music by Michael Nyman; produced by Jane Chapman. Starring: Holly Hunter, Sam Neill, Harvey Keitel, Anna Paquin, Kerry Walker, Tungia Baker.

Ada (Hunter), a 19th-century woman of fierce and eccentric intelligence, who hasn't uttered a word since childhood, is sent by her father to New Zealand to marry a wealthy farmer, Stewart (Neill), whose character has been disfigured by hardship and a misplaced sense of decorum. Though electively speechless, Ada is far from silent; she is an accomplished pianist who plays with such intensity that it simultaneously intimidates and mesmerizes the average listener. Her every gesture, her long silence, have the precision of passion. And her music making is an expression of the belief in freedom and progress. Ada travels with her young daughter Flora (Paquin), who was conceived out of wedlock and acts as an intermediary between her mother and the speaking world. They are set ashore on a wild, deserted beach, surrounded by all their belongings, both of them and their things looking like giant pieces of driftwood. When Stewart refuses to have her piano hauled to his house in the hills, she is distressed and turns hostile towards him. Baines (Keitel), an uneducated, rough-hewn Englishman gone native and who helps Stewart in his dealings with the indigenous islanders, is held spellbound by Ada's presence. He buys the instrument while arranging with her husband for Ada to give him lessons in his hut. At first, it seems Baines just wants to hear her play. Soon he proposes a far more bizarre arrangement: Ada can earn her piano back in exchange for sexual favours. To begin with, she is paid at a rate of one black key per visit. Flora stops accompanying her mother. The lessons progress from Baines touching Ada's leg through a hole in one of her stockings, to caressing her naked arms while she plays. Meanwhile, her relationship with Stewart remains distant and unconsummated. After being initially nauseated by Baines' behaviour, she returns to his hut, and when he tells her that he loves her, they have sex. Stewart, who has become suspicious, caused by a few unguarded comments made by Flora, spies on the couple and becomes enraged, and locks Ada in their home, preventing her from visiting Baines. After she gains Stewart's favour by showing him tenderness and promising him she will not visit Baines again, he releases her. Ada sends Flora to Baines with a piano key, inscribed with a love message, but.....

Twenty-five years on, *The Piano* remains a compelling example of visual storytelling, in which Holly Hunter's pale face, framed by dark hair that draws attention to her large eyes and understated expressions, is captured in prolonged close-ups. No director had made images of women and girls surrounded by land- and seascapes as beautiful as Campion did, with such a vibrant intuition for life. At the beginning of the film when Ada and Flora must camp in dreadful circumstances overnight on the shore where they have been so rudely deposited, they shelter and huddle inside a tent fashioned from Ada's huge hoop skirts. Lit from within by their campfire, it looks like a gigantic Chinese lantern, disparately perched close by the sea. The sucking muddy sand and the maimed looking trees further up the hills all of a sudden give way to a small section of a pearly beach on which a piano looks like a sole beacon of promise. These females are isolated in a society totally dominated by the decisions men make, their creativity thwarted by male authoritarian figures. The land and the sea in all their wildness have

a sort of restorative effect, as if Ada and Flora receive attention from a superior force, even if they appear to have been left completely alone, having to fend for themselves. Jane Campion's extraordinary eye reveals the detail that sets the scene of what is to come. And it also forecasts that images will tell the story so much more eloquently than mere words.

Here is a director who is interested in the people and the world in which they live, where beauty and savagery co-exist, mostly even harmoniously. The British settlers have their tea parties, amateur theatre evenings, their wedding photos, all perpetuated, while the Maori have taken up foreign customs and wear non-native clothes only when useful. Harvey Keitel's Baines is the link between the two cultures, whose skin is decorated by Maori tattoos, but still longing for the traditions he thought to have left behind.



Eroticism is a differing factor too. The British are tormented and driven by it, their repression giving sex an incommensurate force. The Maori have no such inhibitions: the women talk freely about their men's endowment and sexual appetite while their children play at copulating with trees.

Those who have worked with Campion praise her incredible storyboards, the way she prepares before shooting any scene, her brilliant writing and understanding of the craft of acting. Producer Jane Chapman credits the enduring popularity of the film with the way in which it continues to resonate with the female experience. "The Piano is a classic story about female will and determination and, while it's so relevant in the present climate, when we made it was such an instinctive expression of something we saw in women that we knew," she observed. "They had very strong wills and were determined to be themselves. The other thing it explores is the awakening of a feeling of sexuality and sensuality in a woman that she doesn't really understand. Ada doesn't have the advantage of magazines and social media to find expression for that. When we released the film, so many women – and also men – related to this particular expression of female sensibility. And here we are, 25 years later, and the film feels timeless. It captures people's imagination."

This is one of these magnificent films, where everything comes together. The cold wintry cinematography that nevertheless creates a tapestry of stunningly gorgeous scenes, exterior as well as interior ones; Michael Nyman's great score, arguably his finest; the costumes that help to define the characters and their actions. The script itself and the acting deserved all the plaudits given to them. The Piano premiered in competition at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival, where it received a 20-minute standing ovation. Campion (the only female director to date) won the Palme d'Or, and the following year the film went on to win three Academy Awards — best supporting actress for Anna Paquin, best actress for Holly Hunter and best screenplay for Campion — and was nominated for five more, including best film and best director.

"Ada was originally written as a very tall woman, so obviously Holly Hunter didn't come to our minds immediately," admits Chapman of the film's central character. "But she really insisted on being seen and, when we screen tested her, she just had that quality in her face and her persona that was exactly right. So that's the interesting thing about casting; you might have a form that you think is right in your script, but there might be something of an essence in an actor that goes beyond that." Hunter was very much cast against type. Usually she plays a little dynamo full of energy and with an unstoppable flow of words, but here she gives one of the most subtle performances in film history, with minimal brushstrokes, one that summons a vision for all ages. Anna Paquin's steely and at the same time vulnerable observer for this story of passion and survival is most astounding; she was eleven at the time of shooting. Best known for her role as Sookie Stackhouse in the television series True Blood and as Rogue in the X-Men franchise, it is in films like Kenneth Lonergan's Margaret (2011) that she proved herself to be one of the supreme actresses of her generation. Harvey Keitel might never have been better: his Baines perches precisely on the verge of sinking into depravity, yet he proves to be the most humane male exponent of endurance and love. And Sam Neill is always quality, no matter where he is in; his intellect is a major asset to prevent the man he plays to become odious.

The Piano is one of the outstanding films of the last three decades. So good... we show it twice!

Film notes by Tony Janssens, Inverness Film Fans.