

April 20, 2021 (42:12)

Jane Campion: THE PIANO (1993, 121 min)

*Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries*



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Vimeo link for our introduction to *The Piano*](#)

[Zoom link for all Spring 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:](#)

Meeting ID: 925 3527 4384 Passcode: 820766

Directed and written by Jane Campion

Produced by Jan Chapman

Original Music by Michael Nyman

Cinematography by Stuart Dryburgh

Film Editing by Veronika Jenet

Academy Awards for Best Actress in a Leading Role (Hunter), Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Paquin), Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen (Campion), and nominations for Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, Best Director, Best Film Editing and Best Picture. At Cannes: Best Actress (Hunter) and Palme d'Or (Campion, tied with *Ba wang bie ji*)

*"There is a silence where hath been no sound
There is a silence where no grave may be
in the cold grave, under the deep deep sea."*

Thomas Hood (1799-1845)



Cast

Holly Hunter...Ada McGrath

Harvey Keitel...George Baines

Sam Neill...Alisdair Stewart

Anna Paquin...Flora McGrath

Kerry Walker...Aunt Morag

Geneviève Lemon...Nessie

Tungia Baker...Hira

Ian Mune...Reverend

Peter Dennett...Head Seaman

Te Whatanui Skipwith...Chief Nihe

Pete Smith...Hone

Jane Campion (30 April 1954, Wellington, New Zealand) is a New Zealand screenwriter, producer, and director. She is the second of seven women ever

nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director and the first and only female filmmaker to receive the Palme d'Or, which she received for the acclaimed film *The Piano* (1993), for which she also won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. She has directed 20 films and television series, among them *The Power of the Dog* (post-production), *Top of the Lake* (TV series, 2013-2017), *The Water Diary* (2006), *Holy Smoke* (1999), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), *The Piano* (1993), *An Angel at My Table* (1990), *Sweetie* (1989), *After Hours* (1984), *Passionless Moments* (1983), *An Exercise in Discipline—Peel* (1982).



Stuart Dryburgh (30 March 1952, London, England) has shot 56 films, the most recent of which is *Men In Black: International* (2019). Some of the others are *Æon Flux* (2005), *The Recruit* (2003), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *Analyze This* (1999), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), *Lone Star* (1996), *The Perez Family* (1995), *Peach* (1995), *Once Were Warriors* (1994), *The Piano* (1993), and *Kitchen Sink* (1989).

Holly Hunter (20 March 1958, Conyers, Georgia) has acted in 65 films and TV series. Some of her recent appearances have been on the acclaimed HBO series *Succession* (2018-2019) and *The Big Sick* (2017). Some of her other performances have been in *The Big White* (2005), *Thirteen* (2003), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *Crash* (1996), *The Firm* (1993), *The Piano* (1993), *Always* (1989), *Broadcast News* (1987), *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Swing Shift* (1984), and *The Burning* (1981).

Harvey Keitel (13 May 1939, Brooklyn, New York) has acted in 160 films and television programs, among them *The Irishman* (2019), *Isle of Dogs* (2018), *The*

Grand Budapest Hotel (2014), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), *A Crime* (2006), *One Last Dance* (2005), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (2004), *National Treasure* (2004), *Dreaming of Julia* (2003), *Red Dragon* (2002), *Holy Smoke* (1999), *Finding Graceland* (1998), *Lulu on the Bridge* (1998), *Cop Land* (1997), *City of Industry* (1997), *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), *Clockers* (1995), *Smoke* (1995), *To Βλέμμα του Οδυσσέα/Ulysses Gaze* (1995), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Rising Sun* (1993), *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Bugsy* (1991), *Thelma & Louise* (1991), *The Two Jakes* (1990), *The Last*

Temptation of Christ (1988), *The Men's Club* (1986), *Wise Guys* (1986), *The Border* (1982), *Fingers* (1978), *Blue Collar* (1978), *The Duellists* (1977), *Welcome to L.A.* (1976), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), *Mother, Jugs & Speed* (1976), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), and *Mean Streets* (1973).

Sam Neill (14 September 1947, Omagh, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland) He has acted in 145 films and TV series. Some of his recent appearances have been in *Jurassic World: Dominion* (post-production), *Rams* (2020). Some of his other appearances have been in *Angel* (2007), *Yes* (2004), *Jurassic Park III* (2001), *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien* (1999), *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), *Restoration* (1995), *The Jungle Book* (1994), *Sirens* (1994), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Piano* (1993), *The Rainbow Warrior* (1992), *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *The Good Wife* (1987), "Reilly: Ace of Spies" (1983), *The Final Conflict* (1981), *My Brilliant Career* (1979) and *Ashes* (1975).

Anna Paquin (24 July 1982, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada) has acted in 53 films and TV programs or series. *The Piano* was her debut appearance. Some others have been *The Irishman* (2019), *Margaret*

(2008), *X2* (2003), *Buffalo Soldiers* (2001), *Finding Forrester* (2000), *Almost Famous* (2000), *X-Men* (2000), *Amistad* (1997), and *Jane Eyre* (1996).



Jane Campion, from *The Piano*. Jane Campion. Miramax Book, Hyperion, NY, 1993.

Jane Campion began writing *The Piano* in 1984, even before the making of her first feature film *Sweetie* (1989) and long before her direction of *An Angel at My Table* (1990).

Although she was living and working in Sydney, her imagination was drawn back to the colonial past of her birth country, New Zealand:

CAMPION: I think that it's a strange heritage that I have as a *pakhe* New Zealander, and I want to be in a position to touch or explore that. In contrast to the original people in New Zealand, the Maori people, who have such an attachment to history, we seem to have no history, or at least not the same tradition. This makes you start to ask, 'Well, who are my ancestors?' My ancestors are English colonizers—the people who came out like Ada and Stewart and Baines.

Having invented these three fictional nineteenth-century forebears, Campion set them into a highly charged love triangle in order to explore the way erotic impulses and the unpredictable emotions that can arise through their enactment might have been experienced in another century, another landscape:

CAMPION: I have enjoyed writing characters who don't have a twentieth-century sensibility about sex. They have nothing to prepare themselves for its strength and power. We grew up with all those magazines that described courtship, giving us lots of

little rules and ways of handling it. We grew up with so many expectations around it, that it's almost like the pure sexual erotic impulse is lost to us. But for them...the husband Stewart had probably never had sex at all. So for him to experience sex or feelings of sexual jealousy would have been personality-transforming. The impact of sex is not softened, it's cleaner and extremer for that.

Some three years after its inception, Jane Campion showed the first draft of the script of *The Piano* to Jan Chapman, who would produce the film. Chapman and Campion had worked at the ABC together when Chapman invited Campion to direct the telefeature *Two Friends* in 1986. Chapman was compelled by what she read:

CHAPMAN: I felt terribly excited by it. It reminded me of things in my adolescence that were very strong, ideas that I had formed from reading romantic literature, that feeling that passion is all, that living your life for your desires is a way of taking on life to its fullest.

Juggling other film projects, the two began to meet with Billy McKinnon for a series of script development sessions.:

CAMPION: One of the major changes to the script was to give the ending a more poetical, more psychological finish.

CHAPMAN: It really needed the right ending or it could have been too soft. But basically Jane—with our help—came up with the idea of the erotic focus shifting for Ada, from the lover Baines to her husband Stewart. I think this is the thing that makes the film modern actually, and not sentimental.

CAMPION: Ada actually uses her husband Stewart as a sexual object—this is the outrageous morality of the film—which seems very innocent but in fact has its power to be very surprising. I think many women have had the experience of feeling like a sexual object, and that's exactly what happens to Stewart. The cliché of that situation is generally the other way around, where men say things like, 'Oh, sex for its own sake.' But to see a woman actually doing it, especially a Victorian woman, is somehow

shocking—and to see man so vulnerable. It becomes a relationship of power, the power of those who care and those that don't care. I'm very interested in the brutal innocence of that.

Campion set the script against a backdrop of parallel density and intimacy, the New Zealand bush:

CAMPION: The bush has got an enchanted, complex, even frightening quality to it, unlike anything that you see anywhere else. It's mossy and very intimate, and there's an underwater look that's always charmed me. I was after the vivid, subconscious imagery of the bush, its dark, inner world.

The instinctive game that I felt we needed to play was that, while the epic style of the film and landscape suggest the romantic genre, at the same time the people seem very real—so that you're never quite let out by any sense that the action is taking place in a fairy tale or romantic world. One of the clichés of romance is that the heroines are classic beauties, but I wanted there to be a reality to our actors that counters pure romanticism.

We're all dealing with fiction here, but the sensation of authenticity around the look is really important. That sensation can be created in a lot of ways—one of which was to give our heroine greasy hair. Most people when they do period movies certainly don't include that. But whereas many actresses would feel it was going to make them look hard, Holly was game and went along with it. I think it is things like this that give the film and the character really different look: hairdos which are strange but also authentic. And they are hard, but then the lighting is predisposed to empathy with the characters.

I feel a kinship between the kind of romance that Emily Brontë portrayed in *Wuthering Heights* and this film. hers is not the notion of romance that we've come to use, it's very harsh and extreme, a gothic exploration of the romantic impulse. I wanted to respond to those ideas in my own century.



My not writing in Emily's time means that I can look at a side of relationship that wasn't possible to do then. My exploration can be a lot more sexual, a lot more investigative of the power of eroticism, which can add another dimension. Because then you get involved in the bodyscape of it as well, because the body has certain effects, like a drug almost, certain desires for erotic satisfaction which are very strong forces too.

Andrew McAlpine, the production designer remembers that, in addition to the complicated and numerous set constructions, they also altered every landscape in some way to enhance or heighten the feeling or mood of a particular scene:

McALPINE: Take the burning stump and mud landscape surrounding Stewart's house. Here we transplanted and charred dead trees to

create the illusion of a very muddy five acres of primary slash and burn. I wanted the bride to be seen to be drawn into this dank darkness that is Stewart's and then to step out into this green cathedral of *nikau* and *punga* that is Baines's life: a very gothic landscape, surrounded by this cool green light.

Also, the setting for the scene where Stewart attacks Ada on the path to Baine's hut. This had too much openness, so we gave it a web of supplejack. It's such an incredible feature of New Zealand bush, this anarchical black-branched creeper. It's very tough; you can't break it. So we devised this huge net, this horrible tentacled nightmare inside which Ada and Stewart struggle.

The director of photography was Stuart Dryburgh, for whom the main attraction of the story was the perversity of it all.

DRYBURGH: We're dealing with a costume drama, which implies many things, and yet Jane's approach has been totally irreverent. The period is a setting that allows certain extremes to occur, but I found it to be a very contemporary story. The camera's viewpoint on all this is that of a witness directing the viewer's attention in a very intimate way. Sometimes we go to places where the camera can't really go. We've been inside the piano, inside Stewart's pocket, right down at the level of hands and fingers and tea cups. It wouldn't be a Jane Campion film without some wittiness in the framing.

For the cinematography, we've used a nineteenth-century colour stills process—the autochrome—as an inspiration. That's why we've tended to use strong colour accents in different parts of the film, drawing out the blue-greens of the bush and the amber-rich mud. Part of the director's brief was that we would echo the film's element of underwater in the bush. 'Bottom of the fish tank' was the description we used for ourselves to help define what we were looking for. So we played it murky blue-green and let the skin tones sit down in amongst it.

We tried not to light the bush ourselves but to work only with the natural light whenever possible. It's a strange light, a light that comes from above, but also from many different directions at once. There can be very sudden gradients of light and shade from a blaze of sunlight coming through the canopy to the darkest shadow in a creek bed, and these will happen within inches of each other. We've tried to represent it honestly, and let it be a dark place....

Essential to the truth of the period was the inclusion of a Maori 'story.' Campion felt keenly aware of their place in the film, and of the need for Maori advisers and writers to help create such a story.

CAMPION: Even though it's a European story, which is what I am—European—I determined that it would involve having Maori people in the film. Cross-cultural collaborations are sensitive, and for me it was

a pretty scary endeavor. It wasn't without tears and difficulty. But I think people were actually pleased to have a position where there could be a meeting. You



don't just get opportunities to experience that in everyday kiwi society. In the end the cross-cultural quality of it was one of the deeply moving aspects of being on the production for us all, cast and crew.

The result of the collaboration is a large Maori cast, who lend an extraordinarily rich collective presence to the film. An aspect of this visibility is the display of traditional Maori body culture. Gordon Hatfield, himself a carver, who displays on screen an authentic buttock tattoo in a traditional design of his tribe (the 'Nga Puki'), explains: 'In our culture, the whole body is considered a temple.' Most striking are the facial tattoos (*moko*) that symbolized the wearer's status and spiritual power (*mana*) within tribal Maori society.

For Harvey Keitel, as George Baines, the Maori presence was equally important:

KEITEL: Baines has given up his culture—he's not a *pakeha* and he's not a Maori. He's nowhere, looking for a place to be, and he finds it through his ability to suffer, through his ability to go on a journey to find what he needs. He's interested in the possibility of having a union, a family, a relationship.

In common with Baines, Keitel was struck by the way in which the Maori cast, in role and out of role 'tend to have a more profound relationship to the earth and the spirits than the *pakeha* do':

KEITEL: I was very affected by Tungis, the woman playing Hira in the film. She came down to Karekare beach, and the first thing she did was cross the beach to the sea, bend over and sprinkle herself with water. And I said 'What are you doing?' And she said, 'I'm asking the sea to welcome me.'

In 1990 Chapman and Campion set out on a long fundraising tour. In the end the solution was

provided by financial investment from one source, the French company CIBY 2000.

CHAPMAN: CIBY was a new company that we believed in because they appeared to have a commitment to the creative freedom of the filmmaker. They had previously funded films by David Lynch, Pedro Almodovar and were scheduling a production with Bertolucci. We decided to take a mutual creative risk with each other. ...

CAMPION: I wanted to work with actors who would throw me into a different arena, to be called forth myself by actors who were demanding and experienced. The characters in the script needed to be ‘owned’ by actors who could take them on, control them, and have the experience to do so.

In fact the script itself was a large factor in drawing that experience. Campion had long had her fellow countryman Sam Neill in mind for the part of Stewart:

NEILL: I remember meeting Jane at the Berlin Film Festival and saying, ‘Of course I think of Stewart as being an archetypal *pakeha* New Zealand male, greedy for land, and so on.’ And Jane was very surprised; she by no means saw Stewart as the villain of the piece—which I found extremely encouraging. Certainly he serves that function from time to time, but he is not the villain. I don’t condone what he does, but I see it as entirely understandable because of the time he lives in: and he’s a man of his time.

I think this film explores both the desperate and the wonderful things that happen between men and women in a way that’s not often done in films. And these things make for moments of sublime ecstasy and moments of the most terrible fear, of terror. It’s been a pretty scary territory to be acting in—it helps to have had a little life experience.

I see Stewart as being someone who is rather vulnerable. There are certain sad things about him: lonelinesses. What happens to him, I think, is that this shell—a carapace that Victorian men could assume—is cracked and disintegrated by the power of his

feelings for Ada, leaving him very exposed. I think of him as being a man who has lost all his skin....
...[as to Ada]

CHAPMAN: There was a long list of extraordinary possibilities, from Australian actresses to a number of



French, English or Americans. We could have been unimaginative enough to have not seen Holly Hunter because the Holly of *Broadcast News* and our Ada were two entirely different people. Ada was going to be a tall woman, with a strong, dark, eerie, Frida Kahlo sort of beauty. But in Holly’s audition tape her gaze was just

stupendous.

For Hunter, the script had ‘one ingredient that almost every script I read does not have: a vast dimension of things being unexplained to the audience or even to the characters themselves—and that’s just a real, haunting part of the story, very, very haunting...’

HUNTER: The costumes helped me tremendously: the incongruity of having a woman in a really laced-up corset, huge hoop skirts, petticoats, pantaloons, bodice and chemise trying to gracefully manoeuvre her way through the bush, was a real physical manifestation of Ada. That’s what women of that period dealt with, that’s how they developed: there was an obvious physical fragility—and yet strength and stamina, as well as grace, were required to wear those clothes. That was an interesting dichotomy that the period offered me.

I think Jane was very brave in holding out for a more original kind of sexuality and sensuous quality in Ada. Jane really was interested in redefining for herself what you would come to call beautiful in Ada as the story unfolds: from the hairdos, to the severity of the costumes. I’m amazed that she was able to capture this nineteenth-century woman without conventional morals. Ada had her own personal set of morals that guided her; society’s did not really touch her. She didn’t really have shame or guilt in her make-up.

Hunter also brought to the role of Ada a talent unhopd for: the piano skills that were to be crucial in the definition of her silent, screen character's 'voice'. The compose, Michael Nyman, met Hunter in New York in the pre-production period:

NYMAN: I needed to ascertain purely physical things like whether she was capable of playing fast or slow, how big her stretch was and so on. I had noticed from the tape she sent me that she was much more adept at powerful, emotional pieces than very precise, rhythmic things. I had to find music which she, Holly, the pianist and the actress, rather than her character, was emotionally attracted to, so that she could really be engaged by it and give it passion.

I had to establish not only a repertoire of music for the film, but a repertoire of piano music that would have been Ada's repertoire as a pianist, almost as if she had been the composer of it.

Since Ada was from Scotland, it was logical to use Scottish folk and popular songs as the basis for our music. Once I hit on that idea the whole thing fell into place. It's as though I've been writing the music of another composer who happened to live in Scotland, then New Zealand in the mid 1850s. Someone who was obviously not a professional composer or pianist, so there had to be a modesty to it.

Music is absolutely crucial to the film. Since Ada doesn't speak, the piano music doesn't simply have the expressive role but becomes a substitute for her voice. The sound of the piano becomes her character, her mood, her expressions, her unspoken dialogue. It has to convey the messages she is putting across about her feelings towards Baines during the piano lessons. I've had to create a kind of aural scenography which is as important as the locations, as important as the costumes.

Hunter, who'd learnt piano into late adolescence, had only recently started playing again when she was cast as Ada: 'It was a formidable, frightening task. I didn't know if I was going to be

able to play in front of people. But I had to play so often and so much that in the end I could.'

In mid-1991 Campion and Chapman flew to L.A. to cast another surprise—Harvey Keitel. Of their work together Campion comments:

CAMPION: The nice thing about Harvey is that he's not a young actor and he's not an old actor, he's ageless in a way. His commitment to acting and his philosophy about it is absolutely staunch and excited. For me, he brought a whole alertness and awareness of the acting tradition, he's one of those people that really live it.

Campion charged the New Zealand casting

agent Di Rowan with finding *The Piano's* fourth protagonist, Flora. After a country-wide search and a stack of audition tapes, Campion finally set eyes on her—a young girl called Anna Paquin:



CAMPION: I remember when I first saw the audition tape. Anna came on and there was this tiny little girl, probably the smallest of all I'd seen—and extremely shy. I almost turned it off. I thought this girl was never

going to be able to cope with this huge speech. I just about fell off my chair when she began. She just looked into the camera and never blinked. She told this long, extremely impassioned story of how Ada lost her voice, and you totally believed her. It's a remarkable experience to see someone so young with such an instinct for performance.

The relationship of Flora to her mother was scripted by Campion to be one of mirror-like closeness, a kind of symbiosis. As Andrew McAlpine comments: 'The complicity between Ada and Flora is frightening, like a Diane Arbus photograph. Beautiful, too, because it's so tender—and Holly and Anna turned out to be extraordinary people together.' Campion was particularly delighted at the parallel complicity that grew between the American actor and the girl whose 'glorious instincts' Hunter praised. According to

Campion, ‘Anna never really crashed as we were told that children do in movies over long periods of time. I think the great thing was that she had Holly—and they adored each other from the first. They were an incredible team—Anna would use all Holly’s mannerisms of performance.’

Faced with a script that gives her a mysteriously silent mother Anna comments:

ANNA: Some of the time I think Ada’s a bit weird. Like, what happened to her that she doesn’t speak? She hasn’t spoken since she was 6 years old!

I even liked Holly the first day I met her—because of the way she was told by Jane not to talk on set, so I could get used to having a mother who does not talk.

Asked whether she felt there was a likeness between her and Flora, she claims there is only ‘a wee bit. Actually, she tells more lies than I do.’



from Jane Campion. Kathleen McHugh. University of Illinois Press. Urbana & Chicago, 2007.

Jane Campion became a household name and a filmmaking sensation in 1993 with her third theatrically released feature, *The Piano*. The film won the Palme d’Or at Cannes as well as many other “Best Film” awards that year. Alluding to Andrew Sarris’s famous category of outstanding film directors, one critic stated that *The Piano* had catapulted Campion into the “pantheon of great directors” (Margolis 11),

yet this award was Campion’s second at Cannes. As a graduate student in her second year at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, she had made the film *Peel* (1982), for which she received her first Palme d’Or for “Best Short Film” in 1986. Thus very early in her filmmaking career, Campion garnered the kind of international attention and acclaim that few up-and-coming directors—much less women directors—receive. By mid-career, Campion has made six features; the most recent, *In the Cut*, was released in fall 2003. Although none of her subsequent feature films have generated the same box office or enthusiasm as *The Piano*, Campion continues to explore the controversial and edgy themes that have dominated her work from her first student film up to the present: how power and violence permeate sexual and familial relationships, confound women’s self-expression, and reify and distort gender roles. While her perspective on these issues tends to divide and often disturb audiences, one critic observed, after seeing *In the Cut*, “Campion is doing things with sexuality that no one else is.” The films that make up her oeuvre explore characters’ agency, sexual desire, and drive for self-expression—forces that set them at odds with each other, with the environment, and also, particularly in the case of female characters, with themselves.

At issue in Campion’s work are key paradoxes concerning affect and embodiment. Affects and passions are clearly of the body, yet in their throes, one feels, as Judith Butler points out, “*beside oneself*,” dispossessed of one’s sense of agency or control. In crafting visual stories drawn from genres that are especially attentive to women’s bodies, to their agency, their vulnerability, and to their dispossessing passions, Campion generates crises where ethics, vulnerability, sexuality, and violence (or its threat) coalesce. Women are intimately familiar with this terrain, Butler asserts: “Negotiating a sudden and unprecedented vulnerability—what are the options? What are the long-term strategies Women know this question well, have known it nearly in all times, and nothing about the triumph of colonial powers has made our exposure to this kind of violence any less clear.”

Campion’s films question the options for the female film protagonist in modes and genres (melodrama, thriller) and situations (dysfunctional families, marriages, relationships) conventionally articulated around her virtue and her suffering.

Eschewing that virtue, her films ask, What is the status of the female protagonist's choice, her agency in the context of sexual passions, physical vulnerability, and her own capacity to do harm? How does self-expression emerge from injury and limitation? Bereft of moral resolutions, the political character of these dilemmas and the fact that they are, for the most part, irresolvable in any wholly affirmative or satisfactory sense, emerge forcefully—one possible reason for the intensity and polarization of audiences' responses to Campion's films. ...

Family

Campion has stated repeatedly that she did not set out to become a filmmaker, though her parents were both prominent figures in New Zealand theater and she

grew up in an environment saturated with theater, performance, and film. She was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on April 30, 1954, the second daughter of theater director and producer



Richard Campion and writer and actress Edith Campion. Her older sister, Anna, also a film director, was born a year and a half before Jane, and a brother was born seven years after. Her father, Richard Campion, described by historians as a “giant of New Zealand theater,” met Edith Hannah in the mid-1940s around the time that both were featured in George Swan's production of *Winterset*. Early in their marriage, the two traveled to England, where they both worked at the Old Vic Theatre for three years. Returning in 1951, they embarked on an ambitious undertaking—starting a national professional theater company in New Zealand....Edith, orphaned as a child, had inherited a fortune from her grandfather's show factory, and with her money and the couple's collective talents and commitment, they started the New Zealand Players Company in 1952 and ran it until 1956....At the same time Richard and Edith were attempting to create this genuine and popular national theater, they were also starting a family. Both Anna

and Jane were born during this time and their parents were frequently absent in their preschool years, writing, directing, acting, traveling with, and running the company. After Campion's brother Michael was born, Edith retired from the theater.

In the early 1960s Richard Campion started the New Zealand Theatre Company, a stationary group located in Wellington. He also continued to pursue a national dramaturgy in his work as a producer, one that incorporated the aesthetics of colonial *pakeha* (New Zealanders of white, European descent) and indigenous Maori cultures. He worked with an all-Maori company that was committed to presenting “indigenous cultures” and later produced *Green Are the Islands?*, an epic about the settling of New Zealand that critics described as unlike anything

anyone had ever seen before. In it, Campion was keen to represent the difference and conflicts between Maori and colonial cultures that then culminated in “a rousing finale presenting the coming together of all people as New Zealanders.” ...Jane

Campion clearly revisits some of her father's theatrical concerns in her vision of *The Piano*, but does so from a position that refuses a clear national identification with either New Zealand or Australia.

Anthropology, Art, and Early Influences

Coming from this background, Campion initially rebelled when she went to college, wanting nothing to do with theater or acting, interests she had had as a child—“It is loathsome to go and do what your parents did, so I avoided it for a long time.” Instead, she studied anthropology, read Levi-Strauss, and graduated from Victoria University in Wellington with a bachelor's degree in structural arts in 1975. She later recalled that:

What interested me about anthropology was to be able to “officially” study what I was curious about anyway: how our thoughts function, their mythic content which has nothing to do with logic, human behaviors. I believe, moreover, that I have an

anthropological eye, a sense of observation. I think that humans believe themselves to be rational beings when they are not, they are governed by something completely different. And that's what interests me. But I realized if I continued in that field I would have to express myself in a way that would only be understood by other anthropologists.

She left New Zealand for Italy and then England to pursue an education in painting at the Chelsea School of Arts in London. Neither Venice nor London suited her—the former too cold and lonely, the latter too expensive and proper for her forthright manner. After a year in Europe, she moved to Australia, where she matriculated at the Sydney School of the Arts, graduating in 1979 with a bachelor's degree in painting.

Campion relished her Australian art school experience, mentioning it frequently in interviews and identifying it as a foundational experience in her career: “Art school is where all the learning I



did took place.” At the Sydney school, Campion was exposed to the contemporary art world and its global perspective, a perspective that would later clash with the nationalist focus of the film school she subsequently attended. In particular, she has said that Mexican surrealist painter Frida Kahlo (1907-54) and German sculptor Joseph Beuys (1921-86) were particularly formative and important influences on her. Though apparently radically dissimilar, working in different media, countries, periods, and styles, Kahlo and Beuys actually share several qualities that shed light both on Campion's aesthetic development and sensibilities and on the cultural moment in which she did her art training.

... Interestingly, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, the former who wrote the definitive essay on women as the object of the cinematic gaze in the mid-1970s, asserted that Kahlo, in her self-portraits, made herself the subject rather than the object of the gaze:

“[Her] face remains severe and expressionless with an unflinching gaze. At the same time the mask-like face is surrounded by luxuriant growths, accoutrements, ornaments...The ornament borders on fetishism, as does all masquerade, but the imaginary look is that of self-regard, therefore a feminine, non-male, and narcissistic look. There is neither coyness or [*sic*] cruelty, none of the nuance necessary to the male eroticization of the female look.”

In this context, it is striking and telling that Kahlo was the inspiration for the character of Ada (Holly Hunter) in Campion's film *The Piano* and it is understandable how Kahlo informs Campion's innovative approach to female power and sexuality.

...Kahlo made such an impact on Campion that

she envisioned the Mexican artist as a model for Ada in *The Piano*, insisting that the actress who played her possess Kahlo's look and “power.” Campion agreed with an interviewer that the film's narrative also shares aspects of the “tragedy of Frida Kahlo, of her unhappy love life,” saying:

“Yes, we have to pay for passions. [W]hen one sees passion as a means of escape, one has to pay dearly for it. I'm fantasizing a little bit. Passion can be the path to happiness as well as to folly. For some people it's like a constant danger area in life, like an addiction. I'm interested in this kind of ultimate experience, which some people need. I feel great sympathy and even adoration for people who attack their lives with such acts of violence. They take a risk and at times they don't survive it.”

What is striking about Campion's “fantasizing” is that she conflates Kahlo and Ada's physical traumas with what she envisions as an element of their own agency, their intense risk-taking passions—passions that also blend and blur art-making and lovemaking. Though Campion has great respect for their suffering, there is no sense of moralizing Kahlo's or Ada's plight or seeing them as victims; for each, Campion imagines an impassioned, indomitable will.

...Campion became dissatisfied with the limits of the medium [of story painting]: "I decided I wanted to do work about things I was thinking about and involved in, which were generally relationships and love...and sex!...I realized I was trying to storytell, and perhaps I should do the storytelling more directly.

Campion thus turned to the medium of film with an extensive background in and a sensibility informed by both ethnography and surrealism, two influences that strongly mark all of her work. As James Clifford points out, the two form a matched set, ethnography setting out to make the strange, the exotic, and the other *familiar*, surrealism endeavoring to make the familiar *strange*....

Jane
Campion entered the Australian Film Television and Radio School in 1981 and graduated in 1984. During her time there she made four short films:



Mishaps: Seduction and Conquest (1981); *Peel: An Exercise in Discipline* (1982); *Passionless Moments* (1983); and *A Girl's Own Story* (1984)...The early shorts, edgy and explicit, focus on power, violence, and emotional pain in dysfunctional sexual, familial and social relationships. Campion has said, "As a very young filmmaker I was particularly committed to what was nasty, what isn't spoken about in life." She was also committed to stylistic experimentation, readily evidenced in the innovative techniques and visual quality of these early works. But she was not gratuitously so. To complicate her audiences' perspective on the taboo subjects she addressed, Campion employs cinematic techniques that both represent and blur the differences between objective and subjective narrative states. Dramatically synthesizing documentary or ethnographic with subjective, often surreal cinematic modes, the films convey a sense of astute psychological realism shot through with an ironic, perverse, and highly visual wit....

In her first student film, Campion explores a theme to which she returns again and again, one that tends to subsume romance and emotions as priorities in her features: the importance of women's work, their creative expression, and of sexual desire as a powerful, necessary, and compelling *threat* to that expression.

The Piano: Surrealism, Melodrama, and Mimetic Infection

The opening shot of *The Piano* presents us with a dense and initially indecipherable visual pun. First we see slanted slats of light with rose- and flesh-colored margins that we only retrospectively grasp as

protagonist Ada McGrath's point of view—the reverse angle depicts her looking through her fingers with her hands in front of her face. Over this second shot, we hear her voiceover: "The voice you hear is not my speaking voice but my mind's voice. I have not spoken

since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me. My father says it is a dark talent and the day I take it into my head to stop breathing will be my last." These two opening shots establish our identification with narrator/protagonist Ada by way of provocative enigmas in the image (an inscrutable then tactile point-of-view shot) and sound (if what we are hearing is not spoken but imagined, we are inside Ada's head, being addressed both inter- and intrasubjectively). Indeed an analogous enigma underwrites Ada's own self-representation and will—she does not speak and does not know why. She is therefore not fully present to herself.

...In imagining Ada, Campion devised a composite of the women artists who inspired her, giving her character Emily Brontë's silence, Emily Dickinson's secrecy, and Frida Kahlo's fierce gaze. Thus the colonial female narrator of *The Piano* embodies a complex, transnational and transhistorical feminine imaginary self-consciously derived from

Campion's individual, familial, professional, and *pakeha* heritage. ...

In Ada's tale, Ada acts—she follows her will and her desire—and both her husband and Baines manipulate and punish her with acts of increasingly horrific violence. Yet rather than condemning this violence, framing it as the reprehensible actions of the strong against the weak, or alternately vesting Ada with superhuman strength, Campion forgoes both melodrama and utopia. She does so by replacing rational causality with “irrational” character and narrative motivations: surreal associations and mimetic relations. She is not interested in the pathos of victimization but in the struggle and consequences of engaged conflict between people with unequal access to established forms of power. In the end, the click, click, click of the metal fingertip that mars Ada's one harmonious and intersubjective sound, the drawbacks of Baines as a partner, and the oddity of the narrative's irresolution satisfy precisely because they all lack the ring of truth, the resolute closure of a moral story.



Sven Mikulex: “Jane Campion’s ‘The Piano’: An Inquisitive Study of Eroticism Disguised as a Victorian Love Story” (Cinephilia & Beyond)

The film is inspired by Gothic Romantic writing, partially takes place in the delicate and exotic bush, which can be very claustrophobic and frightening. It touches on the forced assimilation of the Maori people, and tries to explore the relationship between fetishism and love. ‘The Piano Lesson’ is very sophisticated, easily the most adult or complex material I’ve attempted. It’s the first film I’ve written that has a proper story, and it was a big struggle for me to write. It meant I had to

admit the power of narrative. And there is definitely room to play, visually—in fact, there’s a big call for it. —Jane Campion

It took three feature films for New Zealand-born filmmaker Jane Campion to spread her voice all across the world, but when it happened in 1993 with *The Piano* premiering at Cannes, the world fell on its knees. Campion possessed a strong, original, inspiring voice full of determination, curiosity and vigor. In a world dominated by men, in a line of business where women have been ignored for decades, Campion emerged as a role model, as a full-blooded author with ideas that are capable of touching the hearts of millions. *The Piano*, a story of a mute woman from Scotland arriving at New Zealand for a fixed marriage to a man she never met and she would probably never love, is an erotic, psychologically explorative odyssey chock-full of emotion. How does a woman, who has been incapable of speaking for most of her life, express her deepest desires? It was a gamble to put that kind of a burden on a single actress, but Holly Hunter is brilliant here. Silent, mysterious but full of intense emotion, she is an epitome of a true Victorian woman. The thing about Victorian women, and the Victorian society in general, is that they had marvelous ways of talking about sex without openly mentioning any part of it. There were subtle but clear ways of seducing: the eyes and the hands were all that mattered in the process, as Charlotte Brontë elaborately showed in *Jane Eyre*, a classic piece of situation is the same in Campion's New Zealand: Victorian literature.

The Ada, as the protagonist is called, enters a stormy, very tense relationship with an ex whaler, a loner played by Harvey Keitel, who makes the seduction of Ada his ultimate priority. It's wonderful to see how much can actually be said when your main character is unable to speak, if we ignore some instances of much welcome voice-over. Jane Campion created a strange film. An unorthodox love story with unpredictable plot and surprisingly well-developed characters. An inquisitive study of eroticism. A story of how human beings are inclined to isolate themselves and live their lives as islands, cut off, shut in their four walls, too afraid to reach out and risk actually feeling something. With *The Piano*, Jane Campion made a name of herself, but even more importantly, immeasurably helped promote gender equality in an industry that is still struggling to open

its gates to women filmmakers, no matter how brilliant they might be.

([Click here](#) for the full C&B entry, which includes her script for *The Piano*, one of her short films, and some short films in which she appears.)



Lizzie Franke: “Jane Campion’s realm of the senses” (BFI, November 1993)

For a while I could not think, let alone write, about [The Piano](#) without shaking. Precipitating a flood of feelings, *The Piano* demands as much a physical and emotional response as an intellectual one. As with the Maoris in the film who, believing the Bluebeard shadow play to be real, attempt to stop the old duke adding another wife to his collection, I wanted to rush at the screen and shout and scream. Not since the early days of cinema, when audiences trampled over each other towards the exit to avoid the train emerging from the screen, could I imagine the medium of film to be so powerful. Like Ada’s piano music, which is described as “a mood that passes through you... a sound that creeps into you”, this is cinema that fills every sense. The opening shot of delicate pink skin smoothed over the screen, as fingers hide eyes, suggests the membrane that the audience must burst through to make the painful and traumatic trek into the film’s dark, gnarled woods, finally to be released in the watery death/birth of an ending. Moving pictures indeed.

A film about silence and expression beyond language, *The Piano* resonates with the silences embedded deep in the texts of such 19th-century women writers as Emily Bronte or Emily Dickinson, women who hid scraps of their work under blotters, who hid themselves behind pseudonyms. They, like the strident composer Ada (Holly Hunter), were told that their creations were most irregular. In *The Piano*, [Jane Campion](#) feels her way around those

echoing caves upon which they built their haunted houses of fiction. It is a virtuoso interpretation of that literary sensibility in a cinematic form, truer than any doggedly faithful adaptation of, say, *Wuthering Heights*. Indeed, *The Piano* puts us in the grip of the repressions of the 19th century – an era which saw polite society sheathing the ankles of piano legs with special socks in case they gave young men ideas. Such is the erotic object at the heart of the film.

Campion is playful with the period’s more bizarre neuroses. The film flashes with moments of indignant humour, such as when Flora (Anna Paquin) is ordered to whitewash some trees after she and her young friends are caught rubbing up against them in a playful – and unwitting – imitation of the sexual act.

But Campion is careful not to let the comedy take hold. Under less thoughtful direction Stewart (Sam Neill) could have been the buffoonish patriarch, hauling his white man’s burden behind him. He treats the Maoris like children, paying them in buttons and staking out his territory over their sacred burial grounds. After the shocking punishment he metes out to Ada, he informs her, “I only clipped your wings.” He is, as one Maori dubs him, an emotionally shrivelled “old dry balls”.

Yet this awful paterfamilias is invested with some sympathy. He is a confused man, who attempts to guy his world down in the chaos of change, who wants his music – and his sex – played to a strict time, so fearful is he of the other rhythms that might move him. If only he could listen, like Ada’s previous lover and the father of Flora, upon whom she could “lay thoughts on his mind like a sheet”. It is the communication of the gentle caress, the smoothing of nimble fingers over sheets and scales.

Conventional language imprisons Ada like the crinoline, which ambiguously also marks out her private, silent space (the skirt provides an intimate tent for Ada and Flora to shelter in the beach). Crucially, it is the written word that finally betrays her as she sends her love note to Baines, who cannot read but who knows the languages of those around him. Her arrangement with Baines (Harvey Keitel) has previously been based on a sensuous play of touch, smell and sound.

Bodies become instruments of expression, while the piano smelling of scent and salt becomes corporeal. Baines’ massaging of Ada’s leg through a hole in her black worsted stocking is given the same erotic charge as her fingering of the scales. After such

libidinous exchange, the marking down of her feelings for him with words only brings destruction, which is hastened by Flora, Ada's little echoing mouthpiece (who is also the most compulsive and intriguing of fabulists).

What to make, then, of Ada's sudden plunge after her lifeless piano, which can no longer sing, into the watery grave? Ada's bid to enter into the order of language brings only death. Her will moves her finally to wave, not drown, to take life.

But there is the disquieting shadow of death cast on to the coda of the film. Brighter than in any of

the previous scenes, she is seen in mourning grey, her head covered in a black-edged veil, tapping out notes with the silver artificial finger, which now marks her as the town freak. She is learning to speak but her voice rings the knell – “death, death, death”. At night she dreams of her husk, anchored to the piano, skirts billowing out like a balloon, floating in the silence of the deep, deep sea. Impossible to shake off, it is the final image in a film that weighs heavy on the heart and mind, that drags us down into our own shuddering silence.

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