



RICHARD BRODY

FEBRUARY 22, 2016

# A MASTERLY EMILY DICKINSON MOVIE

BY RICHARD BRODY



Cynthia Nixon and Jennifer Ehle in Terence Davies's "A Quiet Passion," about Emily Dickinson.

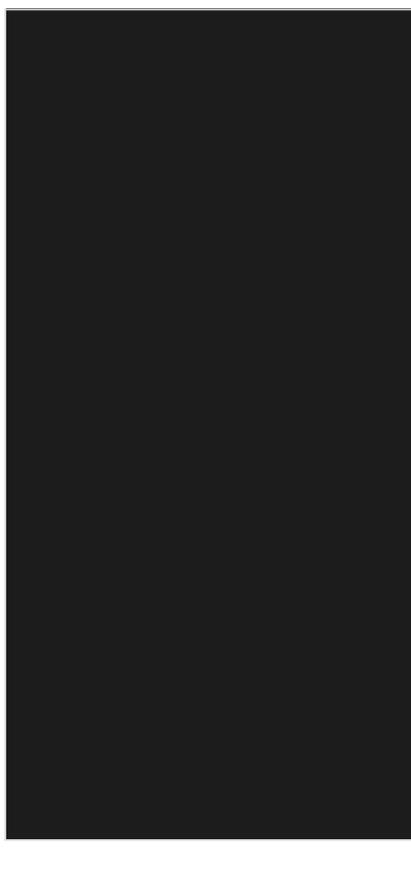
IMAGE COURTESY DOUBLE DUTCH INTERNATIONAL

Before last week's trip to Berlin, I had never attended a major international film festival. (New York doesn't count—it's a self-described "festival of festivals," featuring many movies that have already premiered.) For good reason, these festivals are not part of my regular rounds: I usually write about movies that are available to many readers, because there's a tease built into festival reviews—let me tell you about some wonderful movies that I've seen and that you can't, or, at least, not yet.

But, this time, I can report on a one-off screening that, far from being a tease, may help to resolve one. Last week, while writing in the magazine about the New York premiere (at Lincoln Center) of the British director Terence Davies's superb new film, "Sunset Song," I added that the meticulous filmmaker, who is now seventy, is picking up the pace of production, having already completed another feature, "A Quiet Passion," a biopic about Emily Dickinson, starring Cynthia Nixon. What I didn't know at the time was that, because of fortuitous scheduling, I'd get to attend a press screening of "A Quiet Passion" at the Berlin Film Festival. I'm thrilled to say that it's an absolute drop-dead masterwork.

Not that I don't have other paradigms, but the Scorsese one seems to fit again: "A Quiet Passion" is like Davies's "The Wolf of Wall Street." It displays an urgent outpouring of pent-up creative energy from a director well advanced in his career but tapping into ideas, impulses, and talents that somehow have been kept under wraps throughout his decades of artistic activity. What's surprising, even astonishing, about "A Quiet Passion" is that, first of all, it's funny—not just clever or wry but uproarious, outrageous, hysterical. In depicting Dickinson's life, fixed mainly at the family home, in Amherst, Davies (who both directed the film and wrote the script) turns the story into a laceratingly epigrammatic comical satire on New England's narrow mores—until the movie turns into an ink-black physical and moral and spiritual tragedy of thwarted love, thwarted renown, and illness and death confronted brutally, cushioned by no religious convictions.

ADVERTISEMENT



The movie starts with the teen-aged Emily (played by Emma Bell) repudiating, with a calm and steadfast insolence, the pieties of her Christian boarding school. Her father, Thomas (played with a loftily ironic, quietly domineering tolerance by Keith Carradine), is a moderate freethinker who accepts and even cherishes Emily's independent mind. He welcomes her back home from school, lightly disdaining the reproaches of stiff-necked relatives, even as young Emily radically outpaces his liberal purview. When his strong-minded daughter wants to stay up at night to write poetry, between three in the morning and dawn, he gives her leave to do so, and thus begins the life of the artist.

Within the limited rounds of Emily's moderately reclusive habits enters a new friend, Vryling Buffam (Catherine Bailey), a brashly outspoken proto-feminist who proclaims her sexual freedom along with the intellectual kind. Vryling's marriage and the friends' resulting separation is a quiet trauma, one comforted only modestly by the sympathy of Emily's sister, Vinnie (Jennifer Ehle), and her brother, Austin (Duncan Duff). But when Emily falls in love with the married Reverend Wadsworth (Eric Loren), who enjoys the intellectual exchange but offers no romantic response, she becomes increasingly bitter. (Although, in counterpoint, the scenes showing him bearing up under the outrageously dogmatic pettiness of his wife, played by Simone Milsdochter, have a devastatingly acerbic comedy.) The poet's frustrations rise as the one outlet for her art—anonymous publication in her local newspaper—dries up as well, through the cruel and vengeful narrow-mindedness of its editor. She confronts her brother's romantic hypocrisy and her sister's staunch amiability, and then she gets sick.

Davies films his literary script with a directorial daring that's both precise and free, blending delicately composed close-ups and group portraits with audaciously confrontational and uninhibited visual imagination, involving three-hundred-and-sixty-degree pans and haunting special effects (including a jolting documentary interlude regarding the Civil War). He also makes exemplary use of Dickinson's poetry, recited by Nixon, on the soundtrack, playing like a sort of music that meshes with the actual music track, which is dominated by well-chosen touches of further New England audacity, such as Charles Ives's "The Unanswered Question."

Great acting usually coincides with great direction, and, while the entire cast moves and speaks with a sense of inner purpose, Nixon's performance is special. (If she's not nominated for an Oscar in whichever year this movie is released, I'll eat the pixels.) Her incarnation of Dickinson seems to rise outward from the bone; she seems frozenly poised with, yes, a quiet passion that's all the more impassioned for its unplanned quietness. Nixon's Dickinson would like, rather, to make a little noise, and when she does so it's with a disagreeable, disruptive, hostile bitterness that exemplifies Davies's view of the poet's unhappy anonymity.

After the tautly spirited dialectic of Dickinson's creative days, the scenes of her illness have a terrifying emotional splendor. Nixon plays Dickinson's death like a childbirth scene in which the body is wrenched apart to yield up the soul, which then doesn't ascend to heaven but remains on Earth to inhabit the world more fully after death than Dickinson ever managed to do in life—the wicked metaphysical irony of posthumous renown. Davies does more than film Dickinson's life; he creates a world that is, above all, her inner world, confined to the increasingly narrow circles of her activity that, as they contract, raise the repressive force on her repressed emotional life and raise the heat on the emotions that she presses into her brief, curt, only seemingly cool verses.

ADVERTISEMENT



"A Quiet Passion" is one of the rare movies about a writer that convey the sense that the character, as depicted, is capable of artistic creation at a world-historical height of achievement. Norman Mailer said that the one character that novelists can't successfully create is that of a novelist better than themselves. Similarly, no filmmaker can make a movie that's as good as a good novel or story or play unless that filmmaker is an artist at the same level as the writer; no filmmaker can create a convincing portrait of an artist without being an artist of comparable imagination. Davies has been, for thirty years, among the world's best filmmakers, certainly not as concealed or unheralded in his time as Dickinson was in hers, but not nearly receiving the acclaim or the support that he has deserved. "A Quiet Passion" will take its place as one of his finest creations, as one of the great movies of the time. I can't wait to see it again—and to see it become widely available. It ought to make quite a splash.