



AWARDS

Vanessa Kirby surrenders conscious thought for the key scenes of 'Pieces of a Woman'



Oscar-nominated actress Vanessa Kirby, photographed at Corinthia London hotel, plays a woman plunged into grief after losing her newborn in "Pieces of a Woman." (Matthew Lloyd / For The Times)

By RANDEE DAWN

MARCH 23, 2021 6:30 AM PT



Vanessa Kirby is having a moment. Riding a string of accolades for her role as Princess Margaret in the early seasons of "The Crown," the southwest London native sailed into two Academy Award-eligible films this season with ["Pieces of a Woman"](#) and ["The World to Come,"](#) both of which dealt with the loss of a child — and one of which, "Pieces," earned her a lead actress nomination last week.

She's now off into the world of CGI, explosions and international intrigue with back-to-back stints in the next two "Mission: Impossible" films. But the emotional roller coaster of "Pieces" continues to linger. She spoke via Zoom with The Envelope.

Both "Pieces" and "World to Come" feature emotionally exhausting roles for you. Was that part of their appeal?

I always look for films that move me emotionally, naturally. Both of them scared me. I think that's an indicator that it's something you haven't pushed into before — you haven't gone to those boundaries within yourself and pushed beyond them. When that happens, you learn so much about yourself, about life.

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What did you learn from "Pieces"?

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. But [watching a birth] was the most profound afternoon in my whole life. I saw this woman go on an incredible journey of surrender. The thinking mind relinquished its control. We all think so much and

identify our thoughts as reality — instead of just shutting them off for a minute or half an hour. For six takes [in the film], I got to do that. It was beautiful.

Were the nausea and burping during labor things you learned from being present at a real birth?

That's why I was sure I had to try and watch someone. This woman was so incredibly generous. I tried to absorb everything that she experienced and feel the kind of trip she was on. It was like an ultimate reality trip. Then [at the Venice Film Festival] it was the first time the film had been shown to anybody, and I was so nervous. Women came up to me and grabbed me with, "Thank you so much for the burps."

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Parts of birth are gross and messy. I didn't want it to be a film version. I didn't want it to be sanitized or edited or made pleasant. I wanted it to be real, and all the imperfections and things are what make up life — the full spectrum of being a

woman, which is not this cookie-cutter role.

“Pieces” is obviously really beautifully made and award-worthy, but it’s a tough movie. To play devil’s advocate: What’s in it for the audience to watch this?

As I was making it, occasionally I thought about the audience. And I thought, “I hope it’s not too hard to watch.” But the experience of any kind of loss is so hard. As I was making it, I thought so much of mothers and anyone going through that intensity of grief and how they survived it. So I thought, if it only appeals to three people, it would be worth it.

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You appeared on “The Crown” for two seasons, and the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Harry and Meghan, have been making headlines recently. Do you feel like you have a greater insight on the royals from your time on the show?

I haven’t watched [the Oprah interview] yet. But whenever any royal stuff happens, you feel oddly connected. Before filming the show, I was ignorant. I didn’t think about their lives. I’ve still got DVDs all over my shelves, like every royal wedding, all the archive. I remember Peter [Morgan, creator] saying early on, “Anything you do, I

want you to imagine that you have grit in your shoes. Hard stones in your shoes — because nothing is easy. Nothing is for free. Everything is hard.” Margaret was this bright, burning flame — and she becomes extinguished. So I think it did give me a whole new empathy and perspective, as a human.

Your own family is quite accomplished — your parents are a surgeon and an editor, your siblings an educator and assistant director. Were you kids all expected to be high achievers?

Not really. My mom’s mom died really young, my dad’s dad died really young. They met when they were 17. I think they’ve always had a sense of needing to do it all themselves. They definitely imbued us with a feeling of — I’ve never articulated it before — of doing what makes you happy. Striving to have your own sense of independence.

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No one in my family was an actor. It was such a far-off industry in my mind. But they always encouraged me to do what makes me happy. I will never underestimate that. So when I got the [Oscar] news, I really felt the honor and responsibility of it — to create things and find things and represent things that I haven’t been yet, or in the spectrum of human experience that we haven’t seen before. That’s sort of my mission.

Speaking of the nominations, where were you when you heard?

In the makeup trailer for “Mission: Impossible.” They were doing some hair tests, and [Benjamin Loeb, cinematographer on “Pieces”] messaged me and he said, “Oh, my God, Vanessa, you watching?” I said, “Watching what?” And the poor person who does my hair and makeup — I gasped so hard, she thought someone had died!

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