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Berlin
Berlinale Panorama

The Education of Jane Cumming



Director: Sophie Heldman

Screenplay: Flora Nicholson and Sophie Heldman

with Flora Nicholson, Clare Dunne, Mia Tharia, Fiona Shaw

A production of **Heimatfilm GmbH + CO KG** (Bettina Brokemper, Germany) in co-production with **Dschoint Ventschr** (Karin Koch, Switzerland) and **Sylph Productions** (Nadira Murray, UK).

World Sales:

Global Constellation sales@globalconstellation.com

International Publicity:**Christelle + Co PR**

Christelle Randall

christelle@christelleandcopr.com

Nicole Warren

nicole@christelleandcopr.com

Morgan Picton James

morgan@christelleandcopr.com

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BERLINALE PANORAMA Screenings

World Premiere - Sunday 15th Feb - 6.15pm - Zoo Palast 1

Monday 16th Feb - 10.45am - Haus der Berliner Festspiele

Tuesday 17th Feb - 9.45pm - Cubix 7

Thursday 19th Feb - 9.30pm - Urania

Sunday 22nd Feb - 6.45pm - Cubix 9

Distributors: Farbfilm Verleih (Germany), Frenetic Films AG (Switzerland)

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Logline

Edinburgh, 1810: Two teachers find themselves at the centre of a scandal when one of their students accuses them of having a love affair. A drama about prejudice, survival and the courage to stand up for the truth.

Synopsis

Edinburgh, 1810. Teachers Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods embark on their dream of an independent life together and open a boarding school. Their lives are changed forever when a wealthy aristocrat enrolls her 'illegitimate' 15-year-old grandchild from India. The teachers struggle to integrate Jane Cumming who remains an outsider among her classmates. But Miss Pirie and Miss Woods are brought closer to the girl when the grandmother insists they look after her over the summer. Private and professional lines blur, affection between them grows and they start to form an unlikely family. Tensions rise as the new term begins. The teachers are overwhelmed with the girl's increasing desire for closeness and their own changing relationship. As Jane Cumming begins to feel excluded from her new family, she demands to be taken home to her grandmother. An accusation follows, resulting in a legal

battle that would last a decade and scandalize the Scottish establishment. Based on true events.

Statement by director Sophie Heldman

“In 1810 teachers Miss Pirie and Miss Woods launched a legal battle against Lady Cumming Gordon which lasted 10 years and was considered so scandalous that the papers were locked away for 100 years. Lady Cumming Gordon’s 15-year-old Indian granddaughter accuses her Scottish teachers of having sex in the presence of their students. What led to this early entanglement of gender, race and class? Our film journeys into the female universe hidden in the original court documents. A world where women of the rising middle class strive for independence and a girl born out of wedlock into high aristocracy is looking to find her place in a rapidly changing society. We hoped to uncover the tensions that brought these women from different worlds and classes together and into court, where they remain bound together over 200 years later.

I am the daughter of a Mexican mother and German father, and I grew up in Switzerland, where my parents sent me to a convent school. There I experienced the demonisation of natural feelings. At an age before I knew anything about sexuality, the nuns claimed that I was a lesbian. What was a defamation at that point, nevertheless aimed quintessentially at the truth. I rebelled and got expelled.

It is out of this formative experience that I feel close to all three main characters: the girl from Calcutta whose vulnerable needs are not met and is pushed around like a suitcase, and to her teachers, falsely accused and left fighting for their lives. I am as touched by Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods’ pursuit of justice in the face of all odds as I am by Jane Cumming’s desperate attempt to break open social structures that are not changing fast enough. Therein lies the unique tragedy of this story.

Miss Pirie and Miss Woods are early feminists who carry the seed of future emancipation movements. In the end they lose everything but they don’t fail. Without the courage to stand up against the establishment, they would be forgotten today. The teachers from modest backgrounds represent the anonymous destiny of countless women who fought to advance society.”

Notes by film journalist Catherine Bray

Directed by William Wyler from a screenplay by John Michael Hayes, *The Children’s Hour* (1961) stands as one of classical Hollywood’s most anguished confrontations with institutional hypocrisy. Adapted from Lillian Hellman’s 1934 play, the film stars Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine as two schoolteachers compromised by a child’s lie, with

James Garner as collateral damage in a moral panic shaped by repression and fear. Hellman conceived the play as a study of homophobia in modern America, constrained by the cultural limits of its time.

The play was inspired by a historical court case later examined by Lillian Faderman in *Scotch Verdict*. Faderman recounts discovering an 1810 trial involving two Scottish school mistresses and their Anglo-Indian pupil, a case shaped by race, class and sexual prejudice. "The judges in the case," she recalls, "struggled to discover the truth, but they were stymied by their deep-set race and class prejudices and their ignorant notions about women's sexuality. What they missed is what Sophie Heldman's film, *The Education of Jane Cumming*, brings to life so vividly: the timeless deep feeling and tenderness, and the poignant sorrow and tragedy, of this fateful encounter between two passionate women and a lost girl."

The 1961 film contains telling alterations. Racial tensions were removed, the pupil made Caucasian and pre-pubescent, and explicit sexual allegations remained impossible: lesbianism had to be coded or implied. Wyler adapted the play twice. Under the Hays Code, *These Three* (1936) replaced homosexuality with a heterosexual affair, revealing the era's limits. By 1961, the Code had loosened enough to allow same-sex desire to be addressed, if cautiously. *The Children's Hour* received five Academy Award nominations, marking both ambition and incremental progress.

The Education of Jane Cumming returns to the original Drumsheugh School case, reframing a story long mediated through euphemism. By foregrounding intersecting injustices of race, class, gender and sexuality, the film restores voices silenced for centuries, with unsettling contemporary relevance.

The film opens with a carriage racing through rugged terrain, evoking escape and revolt. Though largely confined to domestic interiors, the drama carries a frontier tension: boundaries tested, danger pressing inward. Conflict unfolds through the charged interplay of women's desires, loyalties and inner lives. Visually, the camera moves between intimacy and distance, sometimes pressing close to minute gestures, elsewhere pulling back to allow competing truths to coexist. Space – physical, emotional and social – becomes central, shaped by divisions of class, race and sexuality, and by fragile attempts at chosen family.

Set within a distinctly female world, the school is rendered with tactile specificity: a patched blanket, scattered sheet music, a discarded bonnet. When the school closes, the loss feels existential, exposing how swiftly complexity is erased once suspicion takes hold. In reclaiming this history, *The Education of Jane Cumming* interrogates how societies police difference, weaponise morality and mistake vulnerability for guilt – a corrective to cinematic history and a mirror held up to the stories we choose to believe, and those we refuse to hear.

BIOGRAPHIES

Director and Co-Writer Sophie Heldman

Writer and director Sophie Heldman was born in Hamburg and grew up in Switzerland. She started out working on independent film productions in New York and then went on to study directing at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB). *Satte Farben vor Schwarz* (Colors in the Dark), starring Bruno Ganz and Senta Berger, was her feature film debut. It premiered in competition at the San Sebastián International Film Festival and was a success at the German and Swiss box office. *The Education of Jane Cumming* is her second feature film.

Co-Writer and Actor Flora Nicholson

Flora Nicholson's film credits include *Darkest Hour* (Joe Wright), *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins) and *Grace of Monaco* (Olivier Dahan), while TV credits include *Hanna*, *An Inspector Calls* and *Black Mirror*. Flora Nicholson has collaborated extensively with Derek Jarman Award winning artist and filmmaker Daria Martin, and her theatre work includes productions with *Shared Experience*, developing and performing the roles of Fanny and Mary Wollstonecraft in *'Mary Shelley'*, written by Helen Edmundson and directed by Polly Teale. Other theatre includes *'Othello'* with the RSC, directed by Kathryn Hunter. *The Education of Jane Cumming* is her first screenplay.

Actor Clare Dunne

Clare Dunne's film credits include *Small Things Like These* (Tim Mielants) and the female lead in *Kin* (Showrunner Peter McKenna) for which she has won two Irish Film and Television (IFTA) Awards. She wrote and starred in *'Herself'* which was directed by Phyllida Lloyd, nominated for a British Independent Film Award for Best Actress. Her work in theatre includes Phyllida Lloyd's all-women productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV*. Clare has written, directed and performed in a one-woman show *'Sure Look It, Fuck It'*.

Actor Mia Tharia

Mia Tharia starred in *September Says*, the debut feature film of Ariane Labeled, which premiered in *Un Certain Regard*, Cannes 2024. She went on to film *Klara and the Sun* by Taika Waititi and work on the BBC TV series *'The Listeners'* directed by Janicza Bravo. She is one of Screen International's Stars of Tomorrow 2024.

Actor Fiona Shaw

Awarded a CBE in 2001 for her contribution to the arts, Fiona Shaw is one of Britain's most prized actors. She has worked with Alfonso Cuarón (Harry Potter), Jim Sheridan (My Left Foot), Brian DePalma (The Black Dahlia), and Terrence Malick (The Tree of Life). On stage, she has given Olivier Award-winning performances in *Electra*, *As You Like It*, and *The Good Person of Sichuan* and *Machinal*. Her outstanding role as Medea earned her an Evening Standard Award. Aside from TV work on *True Blood* and *Killing Eve*, recent feature film work includes *If*, *Hot Milk* and *Park Avenue*. Next up she can be seen in Georgia Oakley's *Sense And Sensibility*, Netflix's *Pride & Prejudice*, and *Presumed Innocent S2*.

Q&As

Director and Co-Writer Sophie Heldman

How did you first stumble across Jane Cumming's story?

There's a beautiful book by Lillian Faderman, called *Scotch Verdict*, which she wrote in 1983 about this court case. From the moment I read it, I was absolutely gripped by the story and couldn't let it go. When I went to meet her to option the book, she told me that since the book came out, so many people had wanted to make it into a film. The story clearly has so much "meat on the bone."

What was most striking to you about the court case?

At the centre of this case you have an Anglo-Indian schoolgirl and her two female teachers. Three people that were seen as completely unimportant to the establishment at that time but they shook it to the very core. The judges were so frightened of the details of this case being leaked into society that all the papers were kept under lock and key during the trial and for a 100 years afterwards. The conclusions these men made about these women, about their sexuality and anatomy were astonishing. Not only their ignorance and their racist judgements but also how it exposed a complete invisibility of female homosexuality in 1810. Legally, sex was only defined as possible if it involved a man and lesbianism was therefore non-existent in the eyes of the law. It is fascinating to me that this case from over 200 years ago holds so many of the struggles we still face today- race, class, gender, sexuality and of course the tensions of colonialism. I find it incredible that Jane and Marianne had the courage to stand up for their lives and open a case against one of the wealthiest and most well-connected women in Edinburgh.

It's interesting to find yourself rooting for the lawyer who is defending Miss Pirie and Miss Woods, when he's actually out there arguing their innocence on the basis of very backwards principles.

That ambiguity is one of the main things that drew me to the story. There are no clear sides, which as a filmmaker I find fascinating because it allows questions to percolate in the audience. That's the idea behind this film: to enter a dialogue with the audience. It's not a statement film. It's about creating a conversation where viewers can see the story from multiple perspectives. It was important not to shy away from the ugly arguments used in the case, it's showing us the world in which they lived. The majority of the film is set within the microcosm of the school and when we enter the legal world at the end, we see the larger society in which these women had to survive and the prejudices they faced.

You must have had to become a historian, in a way, to tell this story.

I was inspired by Lillian Faderman's work. As there is very little documentation of queer life through history, she researched legal archives to find alternative stories. If the teachers hadn't gone to court they'd all be forgotten- but here, in these letters, character references, school account books.... we get a window into their world. What it meant to own your own business as an unmarried woman, what it was like to be a girl from India in Scotland in 1810. It's not only the words on the page but the emotions you can feel running through it. I remember one of the letters Jane Pirie wrote, her handwriting was more erratic than usual, she was so furious and she was writing so quickly that her quill nib ripped a hole through the page. They became so alive for me in these details. You can feel their desperation, their yearning, their humour.

How did you initially discover Lillian Faderman's book?

I discovered it through William Wyler. I was watching his work and looked more closely into *The Children's Hour*. When I learned that it was based on a true story from 1810, I read Lillian's book and it felt like a lightning strike.

At what point did you decide to bring Flora Nicholson on board as co-writer?

I worked on it alone for two years before we met. From the start, I knew I wanted to end the film with the opening of the court case. I knew I needed a British or Scottish co-author because I'm not a native English speaker, and my approach is very detail-oriented. Flora, who is an actor, immediately connected to the story. She took over the writing and made it her own, which was exactly what needed to happen. I stepped back to let her have the freedom to explore it.

What was your strategy for casting the rest of the roles?

I had a clear vision: the teachers had to be played by actors who fit the roles well, not international megastars. I didn't want the audience to project too much onto them. That was very important to me. For Jane Cumming, I wanted a newcomer – someone sensational. One role that could be played by someone well-known was Lady Cumming Gordon to create the status difference present in the story.

So how did you go about finding the brilliant Mia Tharia?

Our casting directors Jina Jay and Jessie Frost suggested two girls, one of whom was Mia. I felt strongly she was right for Jane Cumming. We also did street casting, watching about 1,500 tapes across Britain. Time and again, we returned to Mia – she was always the first choice. Jane Cumming is a complex character: torn between two cultures, different classes, and navigating her place in society. Mia brought that old-soul quality, balancing vulnerability and strength.

For the role of Lady Cumming Gordon, as you mention, you've cast a legendary actor – did Fiona say yes to the part right away?

We sent her the script, and she read it right away. She said she was interested, and when I came down from Edinburgh to meet her at her home, she basically said, "This is fantastic. I read so many scripts every day, but I just have to do this." Fiona's character could be a hero or a villain. In every scene, she shows a different side of herself. She doesn't have many scenes, yet her presence is so strong that you feel her there all the time.

It's really about survival. She cannot afford for these rumours to spread, which is why the footman and the maid are present in crucial moments. Reputation is everything.

How did you discover that incredible house that you used as the school?

Our Scottish location scout found the school. The perfect choice was a National Trust property, partially 16th-century, with a Georgian addition that perfectly fit our filming needs. It's on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The real Drumsheugh doesn't exist anymore, so it was ideal.

The film is beautifully shot by your Scottish director of photography, Kate Reid – how did she come on board?

Our DoP, Kate Reid, was crucial. I found her on Illuminatrix, a database of female DoPs. It was important to me that the film had a female cinematographer. Her being Scottish was a coincidence. I actually didn't know that when I was looking at her work. Kate Reid has an extraordinary cinematic eye, her relationship with light, framing and camera movement is subtle and very powerful. She approached the story with a deep understanding of human

nature. The collaboration came naturally to us. We were both interested in finding the image that holds the most tension and reveals the complexity of the characters. Together with Renate Schmaderer, our Production Designer, we became a trio. Both Kate Reid and Renate Schmaderer stretched our modest means to the max.

It's a very rich piece of work, touching on all sorts of different angles, but what are the key themes of the film, for you?

It's about the spaces between us, both intimate and vast. And the interconnectedness of our lives. It's about survival, companionship and independence. Unanswered needs for love and belonging. The story takes place in the Scottish Enlightenment which set a foundation of values that still form the ground we are standing on as Western societies today. Many of the challenges that we are facing now were already present in that time. The film is an invitation for the audience to discover a period of change where simple answers to complex questions are nothing but an illusion.

Actor Q&A with Flora Nicholson, Clare Dunne, Mia Tharia and Fiona Shaw

Flora, you co-wrote the script and you act in the film as Miss Pirie – how did you first come on board?

Flora Nicholson: Sophie Heldman was telling me the story of these women, and I was completely fascinated. I kept asking questions. Before we knew it, we were asking those questions together. I hadn't written anything before. I think the combination of Sophie as a director and me as an actor meant we were feeding into each other's processes in a really helpful way. We made up the rules as we went along. It was important to me not to bias myself toward any one character. I really wanted to detach from the idea of playing someone and just look at the raw ingredients of the story.

And Clare, what were your first impressions of the project?

Clare Dunne: I was immediately incredibly interested in this true story that I'd never heard before. I thought the script was really tastefully written. You knew what was going on without it being too prescriptive or having to absorb a lot of information. It just cut straight to the core of what it was about. You really cared about the characters straight away. I also loved that it was touching on lots of things we're still witnessing in the world now – sea changes around LGBTQ+ lives, racism, and more nuanced or ambiguous forms of prejudice. It was dealing with things that feel very modern.

Mia, what did you make of the script?

Mia Tharia: I thought it was really beautiful. The dynamic between the three women – the teachers and Jane Cumming – was something I hadn't really seen before. That sort of relationship felt really interesting, and that drew me to the role. Also, it was written so

beautifully on the page, so I was really interested to see how it would look on screen.

The scene where your character Jane Cumming asks if she could join the school as a teacher in the future is so heartbreaking – it must have been a really rich one to play?

Mia Tharia: Yes, all the characters have different emotional positions in that scene, and there's this bubbling undercurrent of feeling and repression. Scenes where that kind of thing comes to the surface were really exciting for me.

Flora Nicholson: I remember the feeling of the air between the three of us, it was so tight and concentrated and delicate.

Mia Tharia: I loved working with that ensemble of girls. Filming the choral scene for Miss Woods' birthday was beautiful, even though I was nervous – I'm so not a singer! The girls brought so much playfulness; Frankie Corio kept asking me questions about Sabrina Carpenter in between takes. That playfulness really translated on screen and made filming fun.

And Fiona, what most appealed to you about doing this film?

Fiona Shaw: It's interesting when a film engages refreshingly with The Empire. We do so many Jane Austen stories that keep the island isolated, but here you see The Empire's tendrils stretching everywhere and the consequences landing back home. Lady Cumming Gordan's son, of course, having a child in India who he sent back, but also her daughter in real life was a huge traveller in the east moving among the most privileged households in The Empire, almost like being a member of Soho House! They could land anywhere and feel completely at home. They never thought they were behaving badly; no one believed they were acting in bad faith. Now that we inhabit this world of "alternative facts", that blindness feels very contemporary. How on earth do we get at the truth of something? Except through the lens of myths we hold at any time.

Now that we inhabit this world of "alternative facts", there's another relevance to the film too: this idea of how on earth do we get at the truth of something?

Flora Nicholson: Yes, and we don't actually know the truth of what really happened between the teachers. They may never have had sex at all. There were clearly passionate feelings – you can see that in the letters – but we don't know if the relationship was ever consummated. I kept thinking about reputation. For a long time, we were disconnected from what it really meant to lose your reputation. The finality of that. Now, in the age of social media, we can understand the devastation of being destroyed by a whisper – of being cancelled. That fear has ebbed and flowed throughout history, and it feels deeply relevant again now.

Fiona Shaw: For women, reputation was everything. Once lost, it was gone forever – nobody

would call on you, invite you to their houses - you were finished, cancelled. Jane being farmed out over the holidays because she might undermine other girls' prospects at the Bath season was cruel. Imagine how that shaped her psyche her sense of herself? Later, she was married off to someone she didn't like, and left him – extraordinary for the time. And Lady Cumming Gordon herself seems somewhat bored by the system, as if she can glimpse a world beyond the rules that she lives under. She likes the idea of education and yet is terrified of losing reputation. There's a sense of tedium beneath all the teas and propriety.

What kind of prep did you do to play Jane Cumming, Mia?

Mia Tharia: I spent a couple of days working with an acting coach in Edinburgh with [director] Sophie [Heldman], which was really good. Because I have a London accent and the physicality of a modern 20-something, it was a different kind of embodiment, and I'd never done a period film before. The prep helped with poise, accent, and even the cadence of language. I also looked into Jane. There are interesting resources about her online, but so much is filtered through old records. At her core, she's just a kid, a teenage girl who's been through a lot and wants the normal things any young person wants. Not forgetting that was really important for me.

Fiona Shaw: Mia really knew what Jane Cumming was about. She mapped the unusual, assured way about Jane – you knew there was a hinterland there, with her background, and, of course, her mother, the missing piece of that puzzle who never was found or mentioned again. The father gave her a name, as it were, but he was just a hopeless case. Of course, Lady Cumming Gordon thought he was the best thing ever, like many misplaced favoured sons!

Flora Nicholson: As soon as we saw Mia, she felt immediately right. She had all the layers – nothing needed to be pushed or explained. She just had it in her. The energy between us was immediate. We got on very well, and I love her dearly, but beyond that, it felt like we just slotted into place.

Mia Tharia: I'm not Anglo-Indian as far as I know, but I do have some similar heritage, which made me approach the role differently, and the racism and othering in the story felt heartbreaking. There were scenes where the girls were having fun, and Jane was immediately excluded – it was devastating to film. It really made me reflect on wanting to belong as a young person and feeling inherently different in a way you can't change.

Fiona Shaw: Many children born of mixed heritage at that time ended up in the servant class if they were “ordinary,” but this girl was bright, so her grandmother “upgraded” her to a relative, hoping she might become a governess. It shows that the class system was always negotiable – when it wanted it to be.

Flora Nicholson: There was an image Sophie talked about – of Jane Cumming wearing an

imaginary crown – because it's part of who she is. She comes from an incredibly wealthy family. She's the firstborn child of the firstborn son. If she'd been born in wedlock, and if she'd been a boy, she would have inherited everything.

Fiona Shaw: The Empire sent many mediocre men to India who were given enormous rank. They fathered children, married and unmarried local women, yet judgment in Scotland was passed as though corruption came from India itself. The rationality of the Empire could be so irrational. The outcome of this case was tragic: friendships and lives destroyed, even when people were entirely blameless and brave to have dared to create a new life.

Clare Dunne: I also found it kind of hilarious in a dark way, that it was these old white men judging all of this. It was frightening to look at how the world worked back then – and how, in some ways, it still does. We are working toward things being more equal, but it was shocking.

And what was your prep for playing Miss Woods, Clare?

Clare Dunne: The script was the main thing. I also read the Lillian Faderman book. Reading it helped me understand the ambiguity, the different statements people make, and the way characters talk about each other. I was struck by how much can hinge on a single phrase – like someone using one word in a courtroom and it completely changing the course of someone's life, even though maybe it shouldn't have. That really floored me.

And Flora, at which point did you start to see yourself in the role of Jane Pirie?

Flora Nicholson: Only very late in the process. When I was writing the script I had to have a distance from imagining myself playing Jane Pirie. I was playing all of them as I wrote! And I wanted to look after them all well. Sophie told me later that when we were looking through the archive papers, she thought I'd be right for Jane Pirie but she kept that to herself at the time. It was important for us both that the casting came together naturally, that we didn't force something through that didn't feel right. When you're casting, you are of course casting relationships more than anything. Jane, Marianne and Jane Cumming had to feel right as a group.

Fiona Shaw: When I was sent the script I thought this is one of the best-written scripts I had read in the year, and I think Flora has a real gift. I admired that they'd worked on the script for so long. It was wrought. I loved that nothing assumed modern knowledge. Everything was accurate. Flora was also remarkable as an actor/ writer because she had lived all the parts - she had a clarity about what she wanted to portray.

And Clare has a delicious period feel about her. She is just from another time - that childlike face, she's just so beautiful. I often imagine that Irish people carry a more innocent air (because they're not really) but we have a kind of slightly Kaspar Hauser element to us. She's a very able person who writes her own films and performs and experiments, and she has a

lovely openness - and the children on the film just loved her.

One very modern aspect of the film is that although they don't use the term "chosen family," about the teachers and girls, that's exactly what they are in some ways.

Flora Nicholson: One of the things I find moving is that at the core of the story you have this triangle – the two teachers and their student, Jane Cumming – and they become their own kind of family, their own home. It exists outside of heteronormative structures, and there aren't really words for what they are.

That's why it feels so brutal when Jane is told, *actually, we hadn't seen you being here in the future*. They take away more than just the possibility of her becoming a teacher. They take her chosen family. They take her home – the place where she feels she can exist.

How was it working with the ensemble, all those girls on set?

Clare Dunne: They worked so well together and had great craic on set. We really hung out together and had so much fun. Those small moments of connection actually really serve the bigger group scenes, because they're long and involve a lot of setups. You have to keep the energy going. Being together buoyed us all up. I remember sometimes feeling more nervous about the wordy scenes, and being really delighted when I had silent scenes or moments where I didn't say much. I could feel so much in those moments, and I felt really free.

Did the chemistry in the intimate scenes with Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie come easily?

Flora Nicholson: Clare's character Marianne is so embodied – so naturally warm and personable. I always saw her as a kind of sun that the other characters orbit around. My job was to respond to that and trust being present with her in the moment. The intimate scenes were very specifically mapped out – one interaction leading to another. We just had to be where we were. It felt easy because we trusted each other.

Clare Dunne: The text did a lot of the work. Once you step into the character, it's kind of there. The writing was very strong, so the chemistry felt easy. When it came to the bigger physical sequences, everyone was just finding their way together. When you're thrown into big group scenes with long shots, you inevitably bond even closer as actors.

Flora's character carries so much on her shoulders, so my approach was just to be Marianne and give her space. We didn't hang around running lines constantly – we didn't need to. The dynamic was already built into the characters.

My job was not to push anything. There was no need to force chemistry – it already existed in the contrast between two very different energies, like yin and yang.

The film has a great deal of empathy for every character – Flora, was that important from the beginning?

Flora Nicholson: That balance was always crucial. Looking at the characters honestly and three-dimensionally is what gives them dignity. Accepting their flaws actually makes the story more tragic – these were imperfect people trying their best. That includes Lady Cumming Gordon, who might be seen as the antagonist. She has her reasons. It was important for us to look at all of them empathically and see how they're tangled together in the same knot.

How was it working with Sophie Heldman as director?

Mia Tharia: She's very detail-oriented and focused on character and process. Because of the period setting, there was more world-building to think about, which I found really exciting.

Fiona Shaw: I was cast quite late, I went out to buy some biscuits knowing Sophie was coming to see me. When I came back down the road, sitting there outside my gate, very patiently, was Sophie. I could already see, 'what a lovely person!' and she came in and she talked about the film with such gentleness and passion and understanding. Sophie's very good on the text, very precise and very empathetic for the particular suffering of Jane...and indeed of Lady Cumming Gordon. She was sympathetic to all the characters, which means that each character gets a chance to present themselves as themselves with all their contradictory airs.

Flora Nicholson: Sophie has a real respect for ambiguity and for leaving space for things to breathe. She's as interested in what's not said as what is said. She loves collaboration and works hard to create an environment where people feel welcome and that they belong. She genuinely cares – about the work, about the girls, about all of us. It was incredible for the Drumsheugh girls to see a female director, three female producers, a female DOP, Production Designer, Costume Designer...and an almost entirely female cast, and to think, *oh, this is normal*.

The swimming scene looks beautiful, but must have been freezing?

Clare Dunne: I honestly had no idea they wore the heaviest dresses in the world to go swimming in. They were so hard to swim in. Poor Mia — she was incredible that day. I'm a seasoned sea swimmer, so I was kind of okay, but Mia had to be really brave because she hadn't swum in a long time.

And – Mia, Clare, Flora – how was it working with the legend that is Fiona Shaw?

Mia Tharia: [laughs] I think I'm in love with her! She has this incredible energy – you can tell she loves her job and working with people. Even on long days, she brings this shot of energy that lifts everyone. She's very present and makes you feel engaged, which was really helpful

on set. She also has this open, collaborative way of talking to the crew, which helps you get out of your head and stay in the moment.

Clare Dunne: I knew Fiona a little socially, but I'd never worked with her on set before, so it was amazing to finally watch her work. She can change things very quickly, has no ego, and is incredibly open, adaptable, and fun. She just wants to enjoy the work. She's brilliant – a big brain. She has this antenna on set where you can feel her asking, what are we making today, and how do we make it the best it can be? It's never about individualism.

Flora Nicholson: Fiona was so wonderful to work with. She had such enthusiasm for the story and was constantly digging deeper into the scenes, turning over another stone to see what might be underneath. She was always finding moments of joy. She's endlessly playful, and her stamina for examining a scene seemed limitless. It was extraordinary to watch. Fiona is fearless and generous. Every take, she was investigating something new – finding a different pocket in the scene. She never seemed afraid of failing. There was an ease and freedom to her that was infectious.

Fiona Shaw: [laughs] Well, that's very nice to hear. I don't know, I'm just as horrible and nice as anybody else really. I can now go around with a very big head. It is a privilege to be in films that are made on a wing and a prayer, because they are the brainchild of imagination and built on enthusiasm, commitment, wholeheartedness, and passion, and the respect everyone has for every inch of it.

Producer contacts

Bettina Brokemper for Heimatfilm (Cologne, Germany)

Bettina's credits include 'Dogville, The Syrian Bride, Bal, Hannah Arendt, Wild, La Syndicaliste, Till the End of the Night and The Devil's Bath. Her work has earned her numerous honors, including 'Producer on the Move' and a spot in The Hollywood Reporter's list of the 40 most powerful women in international film three consecutive years (2023–2025).

e: office@heimatfilm.biz

Karin Koch for Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion (Zurich, Switzerland)

Karin's credits include Colors in the Dark, 'Black Brothers, The Mies van der Rohes and 'Milk Teeth'.

e: office@[dvfilm.ch](mailto:office@dvfilm.ch)

Nadira Murray for Sylph Productions (Edinburgh, UK)

Nadira's credits include Winners and The Fall of Sir Douglas Weatherford (Associate Producer). Screen International - Rising Star Scotland, 2024

e: sylphproductionsltd@gmail.com