

“ATONEMENT”

SYNOPSIS

Joe Wright, the BAFTA Award-winning director of *Pride & Prejudice*, has reunited with his filmmaking team and his Academy Award-nominated actress, Keira Knightley, for another classic British romance, **Atonement**, starring James McAvoy (BAFTA Award nominee for *The Last King of Scotland*) opposite Ms. Knightley. Christopher Hampton (Academy Award winner for *Dangerous Liaisons*) has written the screenplay adaptation of Ian McEwan’s best-selling 2002 novel Atonement.

Filmed on location in the U.K., the story of **Atonement** spans several decades. In 1935, 13-year-old fledgling writer Briony Tallis (Saoirse Ronan) and her family live a life of wealth and privilege in their enormous mansion. On the warmest day of the year, the country estate takes on an unsettling hothouse atmosphere, stoking Briony’s vivid imagination. Robbie Turner (Mr. McAvoy), the educated son of the family’s housekeeper, carries a torch for Briony’s headstrong older sister Cecilia (Ms. Knightley). Cecilia, he hopes, has comparable feelings; all it will take is one spark for this relationship to combust. When it does, Briony – who has a crush on Robbie – is compelled to interfere, going so far as accusing Robbie of a crime he did not commit. Cecilia and Robbie declare their love for each other, but he is arrested – and with Briony bearing false witness, the course of three lives is changed forever.

Briony continues to seek forgiveness for her childhood misdeed. Through a terrible and courageous act of imagination, she finds the path to her uncertain atonement, and to an understanding of the power of enduring love.

A Focus Features presentation in association with StudioCanal and Relativity Media of a Working Title production. **Atonement**. James McAvoy, Keira Knightley, Romola Garai, Saoirse Ronan, and Vanessa Redgrave. Casting by Jina Jay. Music by Dario Marianelli. Costume Designer, Jacqueline Durran. Film Editor, Paul Tothill, A.C.E. Production Designer, Sarah Greenwood. Director of Photography, Seamus McGarvey, B.S.C. Co-Producer, Jane Frazer. Executive Producers, Richard Eyre, Robert Fox, Ian McEwan, Debra Hayward, Liza Chasin. Based on the novel by Ian McEwan. Screenplay by Christopher Hampton. Produced by Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Paul Webster. Directed by Joe Wright. A Focus Features Release.

ADAPTATION

Even before Joe Wright had begun shooting his feature directorial debut, 2005’s *Pride & Prejudice* – which would ultimately earn him a BAFTA Award, among other honors – producer and Working Title Films co-chairman Tim Bevan realized, “We needed to plan on making this exceptional new director’s *next* movie. So we started to look for material that we might work on with Joe after *Pride & Prejudice* was finished.”

The new project would be another classic British romance from a great book; Ian McEwan’s award-winning best-selling novel Atonement was already in development at Working Title with producer Robert Fox and director Richard Eyre. But, as Bevan reports, “Richard took on another

movie and had a stage commitment as well. Very honorably, because he absolutely loves Atonement, he said, that if we could find a director that we all agree we want to work with, then he would hand over the helm – and he did.”

The director was intent on bringing Atonement from page to screen. He knew that realizing the narrative would be an exciting filmmaking challenge. He comments, “In making a book into a movie, the story reveals itself to you as you make it. You are questioning the structure, you are questioning points of view – and, for **Atonement**, we were questioning one single truth as opposed to multiple truths.”

Academy Award-winning screenwriter Christopher Hampton had been adapting the novel. Wright explains, “When I was first sent the script, it had departed quite a lot from the novel. I thought the book was brilliant, and Christopher and I started again from scratch. The script was rewritten; we stuck to the book as faithfully as possible. “

“That was the approach that worked best,” confirms the screenwriter. “We returned to the structure of the book. The novel grows in power as the story progresses, and Joe and I wanted to stay true to that.”

“It was quite a fluid collaboration,” assesses Wright. “By the end, I felt I knew the book and knew the script totally, and understood every moment – or at least tried to. Then, I learned more and more about the material during shooting.

“A book is symbols and words on the pages; it happens in your head. As on *Pride & Prejudice*, I sought to make a film adaptation of the book that happened in my head as I read it. “

Paul Webster had already rejoined Working Title co-chairs Bevan and Eric Fellner as producer on **Atonement**, following their producing *Pride & Prejudice* together. Webster says, “I thought the book was Ian’s best, and most cinematic, work. Once our imaginative director started collaborating with Christopher, the script became richer and more complex. Joe brought a vast visual imagination to the film, and Christopher wrote a beautiful script – without what he calls the ‘convenient crutch’ of a voiceover.

“The themes **Atonement** addresses are so powerful and common to us all; emerging sexuality, intertwining fates, and that sense of ‘if only I’d have done this instead of that, my life would have been entirely different.’”

Bevan recalls discussing the difficulties of bringing **Atonement** to the screen. He notes, “The film was going to have to be all about the detail, about the times and about precision. It was going to need three different actresses to play the same role, and would use the device of multiple perspectives of the same event. It was going to be a very complicated piece.”

McEwan, who has witnessed his works being adapted for the screen on previous occasions, also knew the task would not be simple with **Atonement**. As he says, “It’s a kind of demolition job. You’ve got to boil down 130,000 words to a screenplay containing 20,000 words. In this particular case there are greater difficulties for the screenwriter because this is a very interior

novel. It lives inside the consciousness of several characters. I think Christopher Hampton has steered a wise and clever course through the book.”

Hampton offers, “The best and most atmospheric of novelists are often the hardest to adapt. Yet, the adaptations that I’ve done that have given me the most satisfaction are from works – like Les Liaisons Dangereuses – that are masterpieces. I think Atonement is one of the best novels of the last 20 years, so to preserve its qualities was a great responsibility.”

Michiko Kakutani wrote in The New York Times [on June 1, 2007] that, in Atonement, the author “beautifully [explores] the precariousness of daily life and the difficulty of achieving – and holding onto – ordinary happiness.”

Wright muses, “**Atonement**, though set in the past, has contemporary relevance; it is about everyday experiences, relationships, emotions, choices, and decisions. As on *Pride & Prejudice*, I sought to interpret a period story in such a way that the modern-day audience is able to see beyond the time and setting of a story – and into the story itself.

“What I have learned from directing period pieces is that they free your imagination. If you utilize the specifics of a period very precisely in tandem with emotional truths, it all becomes relevant to a modern audience. In terms of the themes that **Atonement** deals with, it taught me a lot.”

Hampton adds, “The more accurate you are with presenting a period, the more striking the modern aspects of the story become. Audiences watching **Atonement** will see a completely different world than the one they know – and people in it relating to each other in wholly recognizable ways.”

Bevan concludes, “There is a fascinating emotional journey at the heart of *Atonement*. We all have to live through the circumstances of what we do at any point in our life, and this story is a very acute rendition of that.”

By the spring of 2006, the screenplay adaptation was at the 25,000 words it needed to be for a viable movie to be made.

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