

Persmap



cineart - Herengracht 328 III - 1016 CE Amsterdam - T: 020 5308848 - email: info@cineart.nl

Testament of Youth

Een film van James Kent

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH is een romantisch oorlogsdrama gebaseerd op de gelijknamige autobiografische klassieker van Vera Brittain.

1914. Schrijfster en feministe Vera Brittain (Alicia Vikander, A ROYAL AFFAIR en EX MACHINA) is haar tijd ver vooruit als ze op 18-jarige leeftijd besluit om aan de Universiteit van Oxford Engelse literatuur te gaan studeren. Haar vader stemt schoorvoetend in met zijn dochters droom en laat haar toelatingsexamen doen. Hoewel Vera eigenlijk niets moet weten van het huwelijk, valt ze als een blok voor Roland Leighton (Kit Harington, GAME OF THRONES), een vriend van haar broer. Maar dan breekt de Eerste Wereldoorlog uit en Vera's broer en Roland vertrekken naar het front. Vera beseft dat ze niet in Oxford kan toekijken en geeft zich onder luid protest van haar ouders en haar decaan vrijwillig op als verpleegster. Haar zorgeloze leven verandert in een onzeker bestaan waarin ze levensbepalende keuzes moet maken.

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH vertelt, in de beste tradities van Brits drama als DOWNTON ABBEY, BRIDSHEAD REVISITED en ATONEMENT, het waargebeurde verhaal van Vera Brittain die in de verschrikkingen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog terecht komt. Haar memoires beschrijven de invloed van deze oorlog op de levens van de vrouwen en middenklasse burgers in Groot-Brittannië. Het boek is nog altijd één van de sterkste en meest gelezen memoires, nu verfilmd door de producenten van GRAVITY, HARRY POTTER en THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS.



Speelduur: 129 min. - Land: United Kingdom - Jaar: 2014 - Genre: Biografie

Release datum bioscoop: 11 juni 2015

Distributie: Cinéart

Meer informatie over de film:

Cinéart Nederland - Janneke De Jong
Herengracht 328 III / 1016 CE Amsterdam
Tel: +31 (0)20 5308844
Email: janneke@cinéart.nl
www.cinéart.nl

Persmap en foto's staan op: www.cinéart.nl

Persrubriek - inlog: [cinéart](http://cinéart.nl) / wachtwoord: film

cinéart - Herengracht 328 III - 1016 CE Amsterdam - T: 020 5308848 - email: info@cinéart.nl

Cast

Vera Brittain	ALICIA VIKANDER
Edward Brittain	TARON EGERTON
Victor Richardson	COLIN MORGAN
Mr Brittain	DOMINIC WEST
Mrs Brittain	EMILY WATSON
Roland Leighton	KIT HARINGTON
Aunt Belle	JOANNA SCANLAN
Miss Lorimer	MIRANDA RICHARDSON
Exam Candidate	RACHEL REDFORD
Headmaster	NICHOLAS FARRELL
Clare Leighton	DAISY WATERSTONE
Mr Leighton	NICHOLAS LE PREVOST
Mrs Leighton	ANNA CHANCELLOR
Passenger	TERESA CHURCHER
Boy on bicycle	XAVIER ATKINS
Sister Jones	NIAMH CUSACK
Nurse Scott	LAURA ELSWORTHY
Nurse Milton	NAOMI EVERSON
Wounded Soldier	JOSH TAYLOR
Geoffrey Thurlow	JONATHAN BAILEY
Hotel Clerk	CHARLIE WOODWARD
Convalescent Nurse	EMILY BEVAN
George Catlin	HENRY GARRETT
Sister Eliot	JANET AMSDEN
Dorothy	JENN MURRAY
Hope Milroy	HAYLEY ATWELL
Wounded German Soldier	LAURENCE DOBIESZ
Dying German Soldier	ADAM GANNE
Mustard Gas Victim	JAMES ESLER
Orderly	JOLYON COY
Wounded Tommies	HUBERT BURTON
	HENRY RYLANDS
New Maid	MAYA HENSON
Celebrating Nurse	HEATHER NICOL
Winifred Holtby	ALEXANDRA ROACH
Town Hall Speaker	HARRY ATTWELL
Bereaved Mother	MARY ROSCOE

Crew

Directed by	JAMES KENT
Produced by	DAVID HEYMAN & ROSIE ALISON
Screenplay by	JULIETTE TOWHIDI
Executive Producers	CHRISTINE LANGAN
	JOE OPPENHEIMER
Executive Producers	HUGO HEPPELL
	ZYGI KAMASA
	RICHARD MANSELL
Co-Producer	CELIA DUVAL
Director of Photography	ROB HARDY, B.S.C
Production Designer	JON HENSON
Edited by	LUCIA ZUCCHETTI, A.C.E
Costume Designer	CONSOLATA BOYLE
Make up & Hair Design	CHRISTINE WALMESLEY-COTHAM
Music by	MAX RICHTER
Casting by	LUCY BEVAN



An interview with Rosie Alison - Producer

Why did you want to make this film and how important is it to you?

In 2008 I heard that the BBC, who'd made a television series of *Testament of Youth* years ago, were looking at the rights for the book again, with a view to making a film this time.

Heyday already had a relationship with BBC Films having produced *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas* so very happy to say that she went along with our enthusiasm.

The book first came on my radar while I was at school, when the 1979 television series made a searing impression on me. I knew nothing about Vera Brittain when I began watching, and so I had no idea of the succession of grief and losses that Vera was about to go through. It drove me straight to the book, which I devoured. So I'd found Vera's writing and her story deeply inspiring since adolescence. The chance to work, many years later, on the film of this powerful and passionate book of remembrance has been the most extraordinary honour and privilege.

Why did the book appeal to you?

As a writer, Vera herself has this wonderful bracing candour, a psychological intimacy and an extraordinarily searching articulacy. She gets right to the heart of all her feelings and responses, no emotions are left uncovered. There's something very special about the book; once you imbibe it, it becomes a part of you.

Its great appeal is that it is this quintessential rites of passage story; you begin with this young woman who has all these hopes and dreams of fighting for her education, she loves poetry and the natural world around her, she loves these young men she grows up with. She has this dream of going to Oxford and becoming a writer, and has no idea that she's about to be thrown into a horrifying inferno of war, mud and battlefields. She endures so much and loses so much, and yet she refuses to give up. *Testament of Youth* is, for me, an anthem to the human spirit and Vera's refusal to give up on people. It's this passionate act of remembrance, which says 'We must never forget these people that I lost, because if I forget them, then all that they were will lose any value'. So here we are still remembering Roland, Victor, Edward, Geoffrey because she wouldn't let us forget them. In a sense, her book became a self-fulfilling prophecy; a book of remembrance that has become an anthem for the lost generation.

What do you think is the value of Testament of Youth and how important is it to make this film now, 100 years after outbreak of the First World War?

Testament of Youth is one of the few books or memoirs of the First World War written from a female point of view. Vera is the most intense and passionate single window on that conflict and it's always through a single window that you appreciate these stories the most. You really feel the losses and you really feel the hope and youth and idealism of these young people.

Vera's life was a succession of obstacles; she wanted to go to Oxford and her father wouldn't take her education seriously, so she rolled up her sleeves and made her own way there. Once she got there and the war had taken over, she realized she had to be active and become a nurse. So that's what she did. There was resistance from her colleagues the ward sisters where she did her training. They thought she was a bluestocking fake from an ivory tower and she had to work hard and win them over. She then felt a need to get closer to the front, and ended up at Etaples. There, instead of looking after English soldiers she ended up nursing German soldiers which in a way was a definitive moment in her story. She was nursing the enemy, which gave her this great insight into the utter absurdity of the war, and that those her brother and fiancé were fighting were similar to them. It was these insights gleaned from the Front, which eventually led to her becoming a lifelong pacifist.

Of course today her anti-war memoir feels as pertinent as ever. It isn't just about the First World War – it's an elegy for all young lives lost in all wars.

What was it about Juliette Towhidi's approach to the story that won her the role of screenwriter?

We (together with Christine Langan and Joe Oppenheimer of BBC Films) spent quite a long time meeting different writers and hearing their pitches. Juliette just stood out - she had the emotional intensity and rigorous intelligence to tackle the big story because it's not only the book of *Testament of Youth*, there were also Vera's diaries, all the letters and a wonderful collection of correspondence between Vera and the men in her life. There's an overwhelming wealth of material to draw from and we needed to find a writer who could tackle all that and not get lost within it.

Juliette did an amazing job of whittling it all down to something manageable. Then, over a period of several years, the script evolved to achieve a balance between the big historical story and Vera's personal, intimate, emotional journey. We didn't want something that was a stately biopic; we wanted to make a film where you really felt the profound interiority of Vera on her extraordinary journey from youth and hope through all the worst the world has to offer out the other side to a kind of a reawakening of the value and purpose of her life. Juliette wrote a beautiful and deeply affecting script.

Finding the right director is key to the success of a film. What was it about James Kent's approach that made him the right choice to direct?

James really appealed for a variety of reasons; partly because of his documentary background that I knew he'd be able to capture the raw authenticity of some of the scenes we were going to need, the hospital scenes, and the glimpses of war. I also knew that he's always had this rather lovely, restrained elegance and lyricism in his work, a sort of poetic gift. I was very keen to find a director who wouldn't shy away from Roland's poems, and that side of the script – memories, glimpses. He's also wonderful with actors; he's very, very good at coaxing with great gentleness nuanced and authentic emotional performances from them. It's a combination of knowing that he would be able to achieve wonderful performances, have this sort of documentary authenticity, but also achieve this poetry and passion that I was after that attracted me to him as the director for this.

Given how passionate you are about the book how important or difficult was it to find the perfect Vera?

I first saw Alicia Vikander in a Danish film called *A Royal Affair* and remember writing an email saying 'Oh, I've just seen this actress who would be the most fantastic Vera.' I think this film, really, was going to live or die by finding the right actress to play Vera so we were incredibly lucky that Alicia engaged with the role: we leapt at the chance to make the film when we saw a free window with Alicia at the start of the year.

I do think she's a truly exceptional actress. She has Vera's extraordinary life force, her tenacity, her wilfulness, her spirit, her determination, her passion and feistiness. She also has this lovely vulnerability and these reservoirs of grief and sorrow, which really speak to the character. She has this ability to transmit emotion, which pours from her face through her eyes. She transmits the spirit of this remarkable young woman and everything she goes through with incredible intensity.

What do Kit Harington, Taron Egerton, and Colin Morgan bring to the roles of the three young men in Vera's life?

All of the young men we cast were so passionate about the film, which was a wonderful reaction. As God's Englishman the part of Roland was a hard one to fill. He's this charming, educated, handsome, intelligent, vulnerable, tender, romantic, sincere, very emancipated young Englishman who recognized Vera for her qualities, was unafraid of her and embraced her abrasive feistiness. All characteristics that I would assume would be unusual for a young man of that era to possess - that

respect for female emancipation. We needed to find somebody you believed could be a poet, and intelligent, and had won all the school prizes. When Kit came into his audition he had really thought about Roland and immediately had all these insightful things to say about Roland's poems and was so keen to play the role and to take on the challenge of being this rather perfect young Englishman. I feel he brought this wonderful, charming, playfulness, but at the same time a depth, integrity and sincerity.

Taron Egerton blew us away with his warmth, depth, and lightness of touch. He doesn't look at all like Edward Brittain, who was tall and willowy. But we knew we wanted an Edward who had this lovely bond with his sister and he was, alongside Roland, one of the great loves of Vera's life. They had this incredibly intense sibling bond. We wanted to find somebody who could exude this warmth with an ability to tease Vera, who's very serious and rather earnest. Taron just exudes this likeability and this warmth. He's a completely heartbreaking Edward.

For the part of Victor we needed somebody who could express a sort of yearning for Vera yet who possessed an inner poise, determination and poignancy. Vera adores him and he adores her back but her heart has already belongs to Roland. That someone was Colin Morgan. He had to be the perfect gentleman, a Captain Oates character who stands aside and says 'after you' and yearns in private. Colin conveys that so beautifully. He's got wonderful precision and delicacy. The most heartbreaking eyes full of poignancy and he's delivered a beautiful, restrained performance.

Baroness Shirley Williams is Vera Brittain's daughter, how important was it to you to have her input and support?

You feel the strong link between her and her mother because Shirley has always been so driven to achieve political and social change, like Vera. Shirley is so clearly egalitarian – she treats everybody with dignity and respect, and that really came through when she came to set, she just wanted to meet everyone; all the extras and crew.

We've had meetings with her over the years going through different drafts of the scripts, and introducing her to the director. We had a lovely tea with her in the House of Lords, when she met Alicia for the first time, and that was very moving. She's always been very open-minded and an absolute joy to deal with. She read various script drafts, which was enormously helpful to the production. She was quite wary of making sure we got the etiquette of the period right. She has always given great insight into her mother including Vera's love of nature, which we've really tried to weave into the film.

One note she was always giving was that the real heart of her mother's life was her longing to be a writer, and that the writing of *Testament of Youth* had been her salvation, and had been what had really given her life hope and meaning. That was something that we've woven into the film; the idea that it was a real redemption for Vera to come out of all the suffering of the war and realize and recognize that she could do something, which was to write this witness account, and that her book of remembrance could count for something.

What were the main challenges of this film?

One of the biggest challenges was that there is such a wealth of material about Vera the process of distilling it into a film did take quite a few years. In total it has taken six years for us to get it to the screen, and of course, you don't want to make it unless you can find a really good director for it, and the perfect cast. The other main challenge was that because the cast had to be young - and therefore not particularly well-known - it has been an uphill struggle to raise the funding for this quite elaborate period film.

How do you hope this story will impact on its audience?

Vera is this indestructible spirit and there's something incredibly optimistic and hopeful about *Testament of Youth* despite her losses. She goes through the worst that the world has to offer yet she still stands up at the end determined to make something of her life. There is a very powerful scene when she's talking at a town hall meeting and she literally finds her voice as an activist. You feel exhilarated that Vera has not been defeated by what she's endured, that she will not forget those she has lost, and that she insists there is a value to human life. She won't be defeated. It's the invincible human spirit that shines through, I feel, by the end of the film. Though terrible things happen to them, the beauty of the traces of their lives is still with you, and Vera doesn't give up. There is a catharsis by the end in that there's a beautiful remembrance of this lost generation.

How would you describe the film's appeal?

One of the great appeals of this film is that it's a true story – I hope audiences will engage with it because it allows such a powerful window on actual events. I also think it's a deeply romantic film. There's nothing in this film that is melodramatic because it all happened. It's a real story and the love story between Roland and Vera rings down the years. It's also a powerful coming of age story about a young woman who fights for an education, endures exceptional grief and hardship, and emerges with a political voice.

How much does it mean to you to bring Vera's story to the screen?

It has been such a pleasure, a privilege and an honour to work on this film because I've loved Vera Brittain's story and *Testament of Youth* since adolescence. To be able to make it with such an extraordinary actress as Alicia Vikander, who really does embody the spirit of Vera in such a compelling and spellbinding way has been a real joy to me personally. We all went through Vera's journey with her as it unfolded. We lived with her in this lovely Edwardian house and we saw Edwardian Oxford and the dreaming spires returned to the past, and wondered at that. We recreated Etaples, this appalling place of mud and rain and amputated bodies. One really had a sense, then, of the journey that Vera had gone on from her comfortable home and the ivory towers to this place of death and blood and gore. Each and every one of the crew travelled with her on her journey. It was a powerful and moving experience for us all.

Have you made the film you set out to make?

There was a very particular thing we were trying to achieve with *Testament of Youth*, which is a film that feels very first person. You see so many films where it's very external and distanced – stately biopics. We wanted to make a film that is seen very much through one person's eyes, including her memories and glimpses of her inner life. We wanted this subjectivity and this experiential quality to the film. Vera appears in every scene and somehow you have easy access into her mind through the letters she writes and through the poems that she and Roland exchange. I hope we have achieved that intimacy with Vera.

An interview with Juliette Towhidi - Writer

What was it about the book that you loved?

I had read the book as a teenager and loved it, and what struck me then, is what struck me re-reading it and that is how modern Vera feels. It is that sense of connection with someone from a forgotten time that can really strike you when you read a book. That's also something we wanted to capture in the film, how her concerns, fears, hopes and aspirations feel so timeless. Yet Vera went through something extraordinary, something so unimaginable to most of us.

Can you give us an insight into Vera?

The film begins with Vera, a rebellious young woman of 19 and 20, who is deeply frustrated with her parental surroundings and their expectation that she's just going to get married. She desperately wants a higher education and to go to university. There were far few universities in those days, so Oxford was her goal. She has a very close relationship with her brother Edward, and then meets his close friend from school, Roland Leighton. They unexpectedly fall in love. Vera wasn't looking for marriage and romance, but they do fall in love. Suddenly and shockingly, the war breaks out and gradually her brother and fiancé, as well as her two closest male friends, who are also part of their intimate circle, all go off to fight. The story told from her perspective of what its like to go through that sense of jeopardy over your closest friends in your generation, and the loss and the fear and the terror. Her experience represents the English experience of that war. She ends up getting into Oxford, but leaving quite quickly to go and serve at the front as a voluntary nurse. I won't spoil the story entirely, but she has some pretty searing experiences. It's about how she reconstructs herself from those as well.

How dramatically different was Vera's life to the life of women today?

It was both a shock and surprise that the lives of women were so circumscribed only a hundred years ago. She couldn't go anywhere on her own and had to be chaperoned. She had no privacy and her letters were supposed to be read by her mother. Even sitting in a room on her own was considered a bit odd. Women were expected to learn the piano and maybe paint a bit. For a middle class girl like Vera it was all about her decorous attributes, being suitable for marriage and finding the right husband. Vera herself said that the time in her life that she was most unhappy was at home in Buxton. That tells you something about how suffocating it was for women a hundred years ago.

What makes her unique as a female character of this period?

I think she was an instinctive feminist, in the sense that she rebelled against her lot in life, which was meant to include getting married, not bothering about education or broadening her horizons in any way, and she just wasn't going to have that. I think that's something we can all relate to today. She was clever and questioning, but at the same time she was representative of her generation in that they were trusting and innocent. I think that led them to a collective sacrifice that she then emerged from, very changed by, and very questioning of. There's a big, epic feel to her life journey. She goes through changes that for some people would happen over a lifetime, but for Vera these are concentrated into four dramatic and terrifying years. She is an incredibly courageous, strong, rebellious, and very brave young woman.

How do you begin to condense this woman's life and experiences into a feature film?

My task was to translate Vera's novel into a screenplay, which for me meant sticking to the book - that was my beginning and end point for research. I read and re-read and re-read the book and because I come from a journalistic background it is in my DNA to research things thoroughly. I did a lot of research around the First World War, always from a civilian perspective and of course Shirley Williams (Vera's daughter) and Mark Bostridge (Vera's biographer) really brought her to life for me.

There's a nice quote 'What makes Testament of Youth so special is that it moves and it educates at the same time.' What did that mean to you?

It's a little bit like one of the great Russian novels in the sense that you have individuals experiencing a great tide of history that they are powerless to do anything about. It is the human struggle against that backdrop that makes it so powerful. Vera's very personal journey set against this extraordinary epic backdrop of the war is what I think makes the story really special. The fact that she struggled with different forms of expressing her experience - she began by trying to write it as a totally fictionalized novel, and then ended up writing a very personal first-hand account. I think that's actually what gives the book its power. You feel the truth of it.

So when did you form a plan of how you were going to condense this long and very personal book into a story that fits the film but also doesn't feel too enclosed?

When you are a screenwriter, you have your instincts from the outset to capture the essence of the story. If you're adapting a book, your job is to distil the essence of that book and to find the central threads that carry you through. So much of it is about structure, you want to capture the characters, the tones, the themes, and then structure them in a way that feels dramatically coherent. One of the first things I look for are image systems. For me in Testament of Youth there were trains, mud, blood, and a sense of decorum, as well, that contrasts with those. It was a journey away from Buxton and her decorous upbringing and into the chaos and horror of war, but with this amazing personality as the thread through all of that, taking you on that journey with her.

What were the key moments of the book that you had to include in the screenplay?

One of the scenes that hit me the hardest in the book that we retained in the film is when Vera was nursing German wounded prisoners and officers at the Front. Vera holds the hand of a dying German officer and sees him through until the end. That scene is so powerful because she enters the war nursing at the Front seeing the Germans as a sworn enemy. It is about that moment of connection with that human being and experiencing that universality of what it is to be facing death. The humanity of a wounded person, no matter their nationality was a very transformative, pivotal scene. It really leapt out at me in the book, and hopefully will do the same in the film. It catapults her change of heart about war, and ultimately led to her becoming a pacifist.

Do you feel an obligation and responsibility to Vera to represent her faithfully in this story?

I think when you are creating a film often you have to condense a life in order to show a fuller meaning. You don't get to hide behind chronology, necessarily; you want to be true to the essence of something. In order to capture that essence, sometimes you have to play with the facts a bit. We wanted to show that her ultimate end point is a complete change of view of war and conflict. Otherwise, the story doesn't have the same resonance and meaning.

One of the unique elements of this film is the wealth of source material that exists between the key players such as letters and poems. What did it mean to you to have these at your disposal?

Having the letters is amazingly powerful because so much is expressed more directly than through other sources. One of the moments that brought the reality of these characters to life for me most fully was when I visited Shirley Williams at her office in Westminster and she still has her Uncle Edward's filing case on top of a cupboard. That was an amazing moment to look at this object and you think 'that's from 1914.' That moment really brought it home. We all felt it was important to include Roland's poetry in the film and to me, the poems they wrote were a way of sticking two fingers up at war and what they were going through. It was almost like they were saying 'this is the essence of us - this is an expression of something different and something higher.' Here were these men, bogged down in waist high mud and horror and rats, conflict and imminent death. The fact that they were able to write these beautiful, expressive poems, which were often full of the horror of their experience but were instilled into a beautiful art form, is very inspiring. It says something about the human spirit. They also told me a little bit about who these young people were - brilliant,

gorgeous, clever, the bright stars of their generation. I do think that increases the sense of tragedy, again.

What is it like to see Alicia embodying all those attributes and what do you think she brings to the role?

Alicia Vikander is amazing and looks uncannily like Vera. She's an extremely, emotionally intelligent actress who just gets where Vera is in her life at every given moment. It was really exciting actually seeing her inhabit the role.

Describe the three young men in Vera's life?

Roland is the alpha male in the sense that he's clever and charming and has had a gilded life up to that point. He's effortlessly good at things, and very gifted. There's a certain touch of arrogance and over confidence about him, because of that. He's smart enough to realise that the challenge Vera presents to him is a great one, something that he really needs. I think that gives an interesting friction to their relationship. And he's just fundamentally a very kind, loving person, and that's how they connect.

Victor is the best friend you always want. He's warm and kind and the person to whom everyone would go to talk about their problems. He's a loyal, empathetic human being but perhaps lacking the leadership qualities of Roland.

Edward is Vera's very gifted brother who is both an artist and musician. They were incredibly close and teased each other a lot. He more than anyone else was the reason Vera decided she too must head for the Front.

In reality Roland and Vera only knew each other for a few short weeks before war broke out. Was it your intention for Roland to become something of a romantic fantasy for Vera?

I think the fact that in reality and in the film, they spent very little time together did lend a sort of romantic aura and a sense of longing to their relationship. It's really important to us that Roland feels like a real flesh and blood person, so you feel the events of the film much more vividly. It's a difficult balancing act because it's a strong romance but you want it to feel very real as well. I wouldn't say we wanted to deliberately romanticize him, but obviously he was an incredibly appealing, charismatic person. Kit (Harington) was perfect for embodying that.

We're at a time now where the First World War is no longer within living memory - who is the film aimed at?

I think it is a story with cross-generational appeal. There'll be older people who will remember the family stories and remember people for whom it was a first-hand experience, but then there will be younger people who will be discovering the story for the first time. I think it's really important for them to see stories like this in an era where we still have the same questions facing us about warfare and is it the right way to solve conflicts? What should our attitude towards authority be? This was a generation who trusted entirely what they were told by their so-called 'elder's and betters'. I think there's a big warning in there for young people today to always question and make demands of our politicians and those who represent us to justify their decisions. This was a generation who didn't do that. Vera's experience was that their young men were all lambs to the slaughter. Certainly, it was a position she never adopted again, she questioned everything, even if it went against the grain of popular belief and that is an amazing message for young people.

How does it feel to bring Vera's story back into popular culture?

It's really gratifying and really important to bring this amazing book back into fashion but more importantly it is a story that deserves to be told. Whatever the reasons for war I think Vera's story teaches us that the human cost of war is what we have to look at. The fact that she ended up as such an unflinching pacifist tells us a lot about the conclusions she drew from it, and I think it's a really

important story to put out there at a time when we're looking back at the First World War and remembering its centenary.



An interview with James Kent - Director

How did you come to direct Testament of Youth?

I'd never directed a feature film before and prior to this I was making documentaries and television dramas. But I was approached by Rosie Alison, the producer of the film and I think what Rosie saw in my work was a synthesis, a kind of coming together of documentary and drama. As a director I've always been drawn to real stories and to the authenticity of a real event. I think it makes great drama. I'd directed a number of stories about strong women, often anchored in the past, because I find that women are often pushed to the margins of society in the past. Therefore, their struggle is something that really makes me insatiably curious about how they survive. I made a television film about Margaret Thatcher, who struggled against the maleness of the conservative party and became Prime Minister for three terms (Margaret, 2009). I directed a true story about a lesbian at the time of the Georgians, (The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister, 2010) in the 18th century who had a very active sexual life. Of course, Vera Brittain was really an incredible pioneer for women and what they could expect from life.

How did you see the film?

The way I conceived the film is that there would be quite a strong narrative arc to the film. In a way, the first act is the summer before the storm and the audience knows the storm is coming. It was a beautiful Edwardian summer and they're kind of children in innocence. We were very fluid with our camera work and very lush with the photography. As the film progresses we compress the scale onto these individuals as if the tide of history is pushing itself into their psyche. What happens is that the film gets increasingly darker with more handheld camera-work. By the end, in the aftermath of Vera's grief, we're really up close and tight to her. You feel that she is literally pressing up the burden as it's forcing itself down upon her. There is a real cinematic journey to the look of the film. What I hope is current throughout is the presence of nature. I really do believe that when you look at the film and you see the landscapes, plant life, flowers, birds, that the one thing that always renews, as much as we try to eradicate it, is nature. Nature is a kind of objective observer that carries on despite us.

What did you think you could bring to the film that set you apart from other directors?

I'm told that my work is very visceral and personal and that I use metaphor a lot. For example, in the film, landscape for me, echoes Vera's temperament. At the same time, because I've often made dramas about one singular person that in itself presents a very subjective view on the material. I believe I have empathy for the struggle that women undergo to make their voices heard. It would've been far too easy for this film to be a kind of biopic on Vera Brittain however I felt that the quality that I could bring to the film was something that was a poetic equivalent to Vera Brittain's love of nature and of writing and of the world around her.

What was your particular research process?

I always do a lot of research when I begin a project. I trained as a historian and journalist, so research is in my blood. I particularly drew upon my previous documentary film past including 9/11: Phone Calls From The Towers, Holocaust: A Music Memorial Film and other war films I worked on that involved wars in Kashmir, Uganda and Afghanistan which helped me recall those emotions people feel when they are put under stress.

Do you think there are generational similarities between today's young people and Vera's era? One of the really powerful themes of this film is that it speaks to today's young generation, whom, like Vera, I believe also feel abandoned by their elders. If you recall the great crash of 2008, the materialism of my generation and now how young people still cannot afford to buy properties. It's obviously not on the same scale as the First World War, but there is a real generational divide in

existence. Particularly of this Edwardian generation, which had come out of a very staid, Victorian era, technology during the early 20th century – the telephone, the motorcar, the airplane, armaments, electricity – all these things were rapidly changing the world. Vera, Victor, Edward, and Roland were already in a massively shifting environment. Of course, they were to discover that a lot of that technology could be used for mass extermination, which had never happened before. That was their realization; that the world they would have to face after the war wasn't the optimistic place they'd lived in before.

How do you think it will affect the audience?

The film I wanted to make isn't meant to be a period film in the conventional sense. It's a kind of experience for the audience. It has a real uplift. To love in the way that Vera loved Roland, to achieve what she achieves and her survival after her very personal struggle is something that we can all learn from. One of the core themes is 'How do you find a unique and personal voice for yourself in the world?' Vera felt she had a voice, but it wasn't formulated. What she goes through, which is a great lesson for us all, is that all experience, bad as well as the good, will enrich you as an individual and as a human being. We all leave a legacy and influence people around us, as they in turn influence us.

It was of vital importance that you found the right actress to play Vera – what was it about Alicia that convinced you she was the one?

The film is Vera Brittain. What Alicia Vikander offered to me, and why I was so delighted that she took the part, is that she has an incredible emotional intelligence and wells of depth. You simply sink into those eyes and the luminosity Alicia possesses is not something many young actresses of her age would have. What you inherit with Alicia is a young woman with tremendous emotional awareness and intuition of what Vera was going through. Vera Brittain was determined, honest, passionate, driven; and in some respects, intolerant. You need an actress of real fortitude to deliver that which Alicia has great reserves of.

Why did you choose the actors you did to play the three young men?

What's wonderful about our three lead men is that they're very different. Colin Morgan has a wonderful kind of nuance in his accent and he played Victor brilliantly. Victor is the least confident of the three and is a follower not a leader. He was deeply in love with Vera and Colin captured that beautifully. Taron Egerton, who's relatively new to the acting scene, has Edward's artistic side and played him as a very gentle, affectionate brother who loved Vera deeply.

Finally in Kit Harington's Roland you get a soulful, romantic, leader of men - a very accessible, charming, handsome kind of Renaissance man, who was both brilliant at rugby but wrote wonderful poetry. I think Kit enshrines that in a nutshell.

How important was the look of the period?

It was absolutely paramount that we didn't listen to the cliché's of the period. For example, Mr and Mrs Brittain are an affluent couple; they have a house in Buxton and were leading players in that particular society. Mrs Brittain was the daughter of an actress, so she had taste. Perhaps, it wasn't Vera's taste, or the young generational taste, but it is a loving household and we wanted to get that right.

We had a medical consultant with us the whole time when we had medical scenes; we wanted to get that right. Etaples, the hospital, we wanted to make sure that we replicated the kind of horror of that environment. All the time, we were judging against the plethora of photographs of the era. One is fortunate to have a photographic record, but the point to remember is that a lot of the photographs are taken during the First World War were heavily propagandized pictures; they were watched by their officers. It was illegal to take pictures as a private and just send them home. Some did, and those were the ones we were much more interested in. Those were the ones that show you the

bodies lying at the bottom of the trenches and the terrible weather that they experienced. In our production design, we wanted to get not the British version, but we wanted to get the private's version of that war.

What have been the moments from the whole experience of filming that have been the most memorable and will stay with you forever?

If there's one moment that stays with me, and I think it is a turning point in the film; it is the scene between Vera Brittain and a German officer, a dying German officer in the German ward of the military hospital. It's consummately acted and quite graphic, but it is the kind of scene where Vera Brittain sees that the forces that wiped out her fiancé and her best friend, and will wipe out her brother, that actually, they're made up of good human beings. One looks at what's happening in Iraq at the moment and it's very easy to say 'they're bad and no good'. But actually, everybody has a mother. Everybody will have a child. That is what Vera sees when this German officer is dying there. He looks at her and he mistakes her for his love, Klara. It's a real moment of truth for Vera Brittain, and it will feed into this big speech that she makes in the film, which is a kind of call for the end of the war. Everybody is a human being.

Do you have another one as well?

Another scene that was pivotal was the scene very near the end, if it's not the end. There's a scene where Vera Brittain, having made the speech where she declares her advocacy of pacifism and the evils of war, she goes back to Derbyshire where she was brought up, and she returns to this beautiful lake where she and the boys swam right at the beginning of the film. She goes into the lake, she starts swimming in it. In a way, it purges her; it kind of replenishes her of all her grief and the burden that she's been carrying. It was incredibly important to me that that scene worked, because it is, in a way, what that film was about, which is that everybody can pull resources from somewhere. If you really dig deep and you go to what really matters, then you will survive. You will come out of grief. One of the big essays that I wanted to make in the film was that you don't have to go through World War to experience grief. You will be told, perhaps you have cancer. You may lose a relative in some awful way. Grief will come to us all. Handling grief is something we will all need to learn. That, whether you're young or old, is something that I think this film has something quite profound to say. That scene at the lake seems to encapsulate that message.

As for your audience, you touched on that. For a modern audience now, what do you think will appeal to them?

I think what will appeal to a modern audience about Testament of Youth is that it is a universal film. It's love, it's documentary truth, it's survival, it's finding your voice, it's going out in the world and damn well getting on with it. You know, 'Don't give in, go out there'. I think parents can take their children to the film, they will get incredible message about World War I, which they should know, because we lost a lot of brave people in that war. It gave us liberty. Older people can go and really connect with the stories of their grandparents or their parents. It has, at its core, some of the real essences of what it means to be a human being. You can be of any generation and indulge and enjoy the love. You can really glean powerful messages from the loss, and you can get hope from the redemption.

An interview with Alicia Vikander – playing Vera Brittain



How did you come to be cast as Vera Brittain?

I attended the premiere of Anna Karenina two years ago and my agent, a friend and I were all talking about what scripts we had read recently when he told me about a book called Testament of Youth being made into a film. He said it was one of the most amazing roles for a young woman out there. Initially the timing was wrong on both sides but when I heard last autumn that it was all systems go to get made, I immediately got a hold of a copy and read it.

I was already in love with the script and had read the book and so did all I could to be a part of it. When I met Rosie Alison and James Kent and the other creative people involved that's the point when I knew how much I wanted to play this part. I need to meet the people that want to create the project and feel the whole aura and energy around it. Rosie and James were so passionate and wonderful that I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

What was your reaction when you first read the script? What kind of emotional reaction did you have?

As a young woman, I was struck to see a journey of a similarly young woman who lived just 100 years ago and who endured this emotional, devastating but extraordinary journey, to mature and become an adult. I did cry, a lot; even more when I read the book because that was a longer read. It was the complex part that all actors are looking to play. I was deeply touched and amazed how the book and script were in part so personal and emotional, but also educational about the horror of the First World War. Especially about how women weren't really permitted nor expected to do very much or have the right to an education. Vera had a chaperone to simply get on a train and she had to fight both her family, and by default, the whole of society just to be able to go to University and educate herself. It's quite extraordinary to know how far we've come in only a few years, really. And how fortunate I am as a young woman now, to have the choices I have.

Explain who Vera Brittain is and how she fits into the story of Testament of Youth?

Testament of Youth is her story, but it's more than that. It is also her gift to the people that she lost in the First World War. She explains that the book is a way for her to keep their memory alive. She is a very feisty young woman. It was a pleasure to embrace the energy that I believe she had. Sometimes she stepped on a few toes because she doesn't think, but she has a force within her that just goes for it. I am really impressed by her. A young woman who grew up in Buxton in a high-middle class English family and how she decided that if no one was going to help her get the education she wanted, she was going to go and get it herself. She was so determined.

Vera has a line 'Our generation will never be new again, Roland, or truly young'. Did you and James, the director, discuss the effects that the war had on people of Vera and Roland's generation?

James and I spent so many hours talking in preparation for this film. Part of it was about a whole generation that was lost, and also how that influenced her later when she decided to go back to Oxford after the war. She was suddenly sharing her classes with much younger women and men who hadn't experienced or fought in the war. She must've felt extremely lonely because suddenly there weren't many people that she could share her experiences with. She had a lot of people questioning why she couldn't let go and why she couldn't stop talking about the war and talking about the loss. She became the great pacifist that we all know of, but it must've been quite hard to

be that young and have other teenagers question you like that when you've lost everyone. We did talk a lot about that.

How did you go about researching the role of Vera?

My research started with the book. I also read parts of Chronicle of Youth. But it was the letters between Vera and Roland, her brother and Victor that were the key for me. The book was something that Vera created from her memories ten years after they happened but the letters are the insight into what actually happened between those young people right then. To read the last letter that Roland sent to Vera when he was going to come home on leave to get married were the actual last words she ever heard from him. I kept that letter with me in my pocket when filming because it was such fast access for me to get emotionally attached to whatever trauma that she went through.

I also met Shirley Williams and some of her family when they came on set, which was a real honour for me. They visited us in Oxford while we were shooting. Shirley is such an extraordinary woman. It was like a little glimpse through a window of how Vera might have been. It was also quite terrifying to hear her say, "So, you're going to play my mother". Just by getting to know Shirley a little certainly gave me a sense of the woman her mother was.

It's a truly tragic story about loss. What do you think an audience will take from it or how will it impact them?

I think that this film will have hopefully a huge impact on people in the same way that I got emotionally attached to it when I read the book and the script. It is a film about loss and grief, but also about truly believing in something and fighting for it. It's educational about the role of women during the First World War and is written from a woman's point of view, which was rare for that time. But mostly, it's a story about youth, about young people, about the relationships that they have, about being naïve but still so hopeful for what the world can offer. It's also about how war makes everything suddenly break down and how your dreams can shatter. Hopefully, afterwards, Vera's proof that you can rise from it and decide to put up a fight. She became a pacifist and feminist and she showed that is possible to survive and rebuild your life.

What sort of responsibility did you feel portraying a real character from history?

I think it is quite terrifying for any actor to portray a person who existed in real life. I felt an enormous responsibility to the people who knew Vera and to her family and descendents. What we and the people who knew her wanted was to make a story that connects with the audience and that actually tells her story in as rounded and complete a way we could in terms of film. I'm not Vera but I did try my best to bring out the emotional impact she had on the other people in her life. I had to use all my imagination and hopefully be true to all the information I had been given from the people who knew her best. I've tried to create her in my head and stay true to the story we were making which was to tell the story of who Vera Brittain was.

What do you think is so appealing about this story that it's attracted such an impressive cast?

Kit, Taron and Colin are all brilliant actors. They are brave, emotionally intelligent and they made me a better actress. With our director James steering us it all felt very natural. We had to dig deep which was difficult at times but we still enjoyed a lightness and humour on-set. We got to know each other very well, which helped to create a strong bond between us and in turn hopefully create a great film. Then I got to work with Dominic West and Emily Watson, people that I'd looked up to and admired for a long time. I was very fortunate to be able to be amongst them.

Vera has many significant relationships, but none more so than with the men in her life. How did you go about creating these relationships with them?

Kit and I knew each other already as we'd worked on the same movie together but didn't have any scenes. I was excited to finally work closely with him. So Kit and I already had a connection, which

given the intense romantic relationship that they had, was a real gift. I think in total they only met for about 21 days.

Taron, who played my brother made me laugh the most on set. He always brought so much energy to the set, which was incredibly infectious and helped us to recreate the relationship that Vera and Edward had in the film. It's almost like they're so close they are like twins. It was like they could finish each other's sentences. It was very important in this film to also show the lightness. We know what is to come in the story is painful but you also want to see the humanity that existed underneath that pain. It is instinctive for some people to fight against grief and that is simply another means of survival. Even in the worst of times everyone tries is to keep humour.

Vera loved clothes and would make notes in her diary of what she wore and to which occasion. What role do her costumes play in the film?

To say that Vera was a fashionista almost makes her sound flippant however we know from her diaries that she did enjoy fashion and clothes. Obviously we knew what era we were going to portray and instinctively when you think of wartime it can be seen as a dull period for fashion because there was so much destruction around. She definitely had other things in her head that took up much more space but she was not a boring girl who sat in her room only reading books. She enjoyed life and the beauty in nature particularly and I loved how she talked about nature. Consolata (costume designer) and I talked a lot about what Vera would wear and she had over 75 costumes to choose from. The costumes and Consolata's choice of colours very much tell the story of Vera's journey too from pre-war to post-war; from the lightness of those final summer days with the boys, through the darkness of war and then emergence into the light again once the war was over. That first costume fitting is always the most important step for me to begin to realise and feel the character I'm playing and Consolata let me be very much a part of that process which was important for me.

The script is careful to highlight the hardships endured by the VADs and the soldiers. What scenes did you find particularly challenging to film?

The toughest scenes to film were the most emotionally charged ones. My absolute favourite is when she is nursing a dying German soldier and says goodbye to him. She partly sees Roland and all the other young English soldiers reflected in him. Whatever person, whichever country you're from, whichever side you're on, war is devastating. In another scene she undresses this badly wounded man and washes him, which sparks a memory where she emotionally connects with Roland. Those scenes were tough and quite small in the script, but then turned out, for me at least, to be two of the biggest scenes in the film.

Vera's journey is an incredibly emotional personal one. How did you approach the different emotional elements within her character?

It helped in the way that James shot the film because it made it feel almost like three films in one. We begin Vera's story at her family home in Buxton - that glorious summer when she is excited about life, trying out for Oxford, and falling in love for the first time. Then when she goes down to Oxford, Vera discovers her independence, meets other like-minded young women and for the first time feels connected to the world, through finding a means to express her thoughts and feelings. Finally, we see Vera nursing at the front and immersed in the horror of war where she finds a new emotional self before coming out the other side as a survivor.

What work did you do on the speech and the dialect patterns to achieve that early 1920's British accent?

I had a dialect coach who worked with me before and during filming who gave me the confidence I needed to simply let go. I had a big speech at the end of the film, which we shot on the penultimate day, which was great because I'd had weeks to discover Vera's voice. In reality she really did find her

voice in that scene. People need to see that she has it in her to be a spokesperson, that she's able to express herself. It's when the rest of her life began. I knew it was a big job and I hope I did well.

What have been the moments that will stay with you through this particular filming experience, do you think?

When I look back on the films I've made it's those when the entire experience is a similar one for the cast and crew that stick in my memory. We all fell in love with this project together which was a very beautiful thing. On this film, I had a particularly strong connection with the director James and with Rosie the producer. When you feel that early on and then you start to actually feel that you're doing something that you truly believe in and that audiences will hopefully love it too it makes you feel very proud.

