



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Piano

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Long before *The Power of the Dog*, Campion explored the relationship between sexuality and power with this Palme d'Or-winning tale of a woman, mysteriously mute, arriving with her daughter for an arranged marriage in 19th-century New Zealand, and getting caught up in a strange arrangement with her husband's neighbour. The titular musical instrument is both bargaining tool and an outlet for private passions.

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For a while I could not think, let alone write, about *The Piano* without shaking. Precipitating a flood of feelings, *The Piano* demands as much a physical and emotional response as an intellectual one. As with the Maoris in the film who, believing the Bluebeard shadow play to be real, attempt to stop the old duke add another wife to his collection, I wanted to rush at the screen and shout and scream. Not since the early days of cinema, when audiences trampled over each other towards the exit to avoid the train emerging from the screen, could I imagine the medium of film to be so powerful. Like Ada's piano music, which is described as 'a mood that passes through you... a sound that creeps into you', this is cinema that fills every sense. The opening shot of delicate pink skin smoothed over the screen, as fingers hide eyes, suggests the membrane that the audience must burst through to make the painful and traumatic trek into the film's dark, gnarled woods, finally to be released in the watery death/birth of an ending. Moving pictures indeed.

A film about silence and expression beyond language, *The Piano* resonates with the silences embedded deep in the texts of such 19th-century women writers as Emily Brontë or Emily Dickinson, women who hid scraps of their work under blotters, who hid themselves behind pseudonyms. They, like the strident composer Ada, were told that their creations were most irregular. In *The Piano*, Jane Campion feels her way around those echoing caves upon which they built their haunted houses of fiction. It is a virtuoso interpretation of that literary sensibility in a cinematic form, truer than any doggedly faithful adaptation of, say, *Wuthering Heights*. Indeed, *The Piano* puts us in the grip of the repressions of the 19th century – an era which saw polite society sheathing the ankles of piano legs with special socks in case they gave young men ideas. Such is the erotic object at the heart of the film.

Campion is playful with the period's more bizarre neuroses. The film flashes with moments of indignant humour, such as when Flora is ordered to whitewash some trees after she and her young friends are caught rubbing up against them in a playful – and unwitting – imitation of the sexual act. But Campion is careful not to let the comedy take hold. Under less thoughtful direction Stewart could have been the buffoonish patriarch, hauling his white man's burden behind him. He treats the Maoris like children, paying them in buttons and staking out his territory over their sacred burial grounds. After the shocking punishment he metes out to Ada, he informs her, 'I only clipped your wings.' He is, as one Maori dubs him, an emotionally shrivelled 'old dry balls.' Yet this awful paterfamilias is invested with some sympathy. He is a confused man, who attempts to guy his world down in the chaos of change, who wants his music – and his sex – played to a strict time, so fearful is he of the other rhythms that might move him. If only he could listen, like Ada's

previous lover and the father of Flora, upon whom she could ‘lay thoughts on his mind like a sheet.’ It is the communication of the gentle caress, the smoothing of nimble fingers over sheets and scales.

Conventional language imprisons Ada like the crinoline, which ambiguously also marks out her private, silent space (the skirt provides an intimate tent for Ada and Flora to shelter in the beach). Crucially, it is the written word that finally betrays her as she sends her love note to Baines, who cannot read but who knows the languages of those around him. Her arrangement with Baines has previously been based on a sensuous play of touch, smell and sound.

Bodies become instruments of expression, while the piano smelling of scent and salt becomes corporeal. Baines’ massaging of Ada’s leg through a hole in her black worsted stocking is given the same erotic charge as her fingering of the scales. After such libidinous exchange, the marking down of her feelings for him with words only brings destruction, which is hastened by Flora, Ada’s little echoing mouthpiece (who is also the most compulsive and intriguing of fabulists).

What to make, then, of Ada’s sudden plunge after her lifeless piano, which can no longer sing, into the watery grave? Ada’s bid to enter into the order of language brings only death. Her will moves her finally to wave, not drown, to take life.

But there is the disquieting shadow of death cast on to the coda of the film. Brighter than in any of the previous scenes, she is seen in mourning grey, her head covered in a black-edged veil, tapping out notes with the silver artificial finger, which now marks her as the town freak. She is learning to speak but her voice rings the knell ‘death, death, death’. At night she dreams of her husk, anchored to the piano, skirts billowing out like a balloon, floating in the silence of the deep, deep sea. Impossible to shake off, it is the final image in a film that weighs heavy on the heart and mind, that drags us down into our own shuddering silence.

**Lizzie Francke, *Sight and Sound*, November 1993**

## **Jane Campion on ‘The Piano’**

I feel a kinship between the kind of romance that Emily Brontë portrays in *Wuthering Heights* and this film. Hers is not the notion of romance we’ve come to use; it’s very harsh and extreme, a gothic exploration of the romantic impulse. I wanted to respond to these ideas in my own century. My not writing in Brontë’s time means that I can look at a side of the relationship that she could not develop. My exploration can be a lot more sexual, a lot more investigative of the power of eroticism. Then you get involved in actual bodyscape as well, because the body has certain effects – like a drug almost – certain desires for erotic satisfaction which are very strong forces.

I have enjoyed writing characters who don’t have a twentieth-century sensibility about sex. We’ve grown up with so many expectations that the erotic impulse is almost lost to us, but these characters have nothing to prepare them for its strength and power. I think the romantic impulse is in all of us and sometimes we live it for a short time, but it’s not part of a sensible way of living. It’s a heroic path and generally ends dangerously. I treasure it and believe it’s a path of great courage. It can also be a path of the foolhardy and the compulsive.

**Jane Campion, *Sight & Sound*, October 1993**

THE PIANO

Directed by: Jane Campion  
©: Jan Chapman Productions  
©: CiBy 2000  
A Jan Chapman *production*  
Presented by: CiBy 2000, Australian Film Commission  
Developed with the assistance of:  
New South Wales Film and Television Office  
Executive Producer for *CiBy 2000*: Alain Depardieu  
Producer: Jan Chapman  
Associate Producer: Mark Turnbull  
Unit Manager: John Wilson  
Production Manager: Chloe Smith  
Production Accountants: Keith Mackenzie, Anna McMurtry  
Location Manager: Sally Sherratt  
Post-production Supervisors: Stephen O’Rourke, Anne Berriman, Lynn-Maree Danzey  
Research: Colin Englert, Peter Long  
2nd Unit Director/Media Kit Director: Colin Englert  
1st Assistant Director: Mark Turnbull  
Continuity: Lynn-Maree Danzey  
New Zealand Casting Directors: Diana Rowan, Susie Figgis, Victoria Thomas  
Australia Casting Directors: Alison Barrett, Robyn Cammell  
Script Editor: Billy Mackinnon  
Written by: Jane Campion  
Maori Dialogue: Waihoroi Shortland, Selwyn Muru  
Director of Photography: Stuart Dryburgh  
2nd Unit Camera/Media Kit Camera: Rewa Harre  
Camera Operator: Alun Bollinger  
Gaffer: Don Jowsey, Kevin Riley  
Key Grip: Geoff Jamieson  
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Wayne Rugg  
Editor: Veronika Jenet  
Production Designer: Andrew McAlpine  
Supervising Art Director: Gregory Keen  
Set Decorator: Meryl Cronin  
Props Buyer: Mark Grenfell  
Costume Designer: Janet Patterson  
Wardrobe Co-ordinator: Barbara Darrag  
Hair/Make-up Supervisor: Noriko Watanabe  
Make-up for Holly Hunter: Kathrine James  
Prosthetics Supervisor: Bob McCarron  
Prosthetics: Marjory Hamlin  
Title Design: Peter Long  
Opticals: Roger Cowland  
Grading: Arthur Cambridge  
Music: Michael Nyman  
Solo Piano: Holly Hunter  
Music Performed by: Munich Philharmonic Orchestra  
Saxophones: John Harle, David Roach,Andrew Findon  
Choreography: Mary-Anne Schultz  
Sound Design: Lee Smith  
Sound Recording: Tony Johnson  
Sound Mixer: Gethin Creagh  
Boom Operator: Alexander Paton  
Dialogue Editor: Gary O’Grady, Jeanine Chialvo  
Effects Mixer: Martin Oswin  
Effects Editor: Peter Townend  
Fight/Stunt Co-ordinator/Safety Officer: Robert Bruce  
Maori Advisers: Waihoroi Shortland, Selwyn Muru  
Maori Performance and Language Adviser: Temuera Morrison

Cast:

Holly Hunter (*Ada*)  
Harvey Keitel (*George Baines*)  
Sam Neill (*Stewart*)  
Anna Paquin (*Flora*)  
Kerry Walker (*Aunt Morag*)  
Genevieve Lemon (*Nessie*)  
Tungia Baker (*Hira*)  
Ian Mune (*reverend*)  
Peter Dennett (*head seaman*)  
Te Whatanui Skipwith (*Chief Nihe*)  
Pete Smith (*Hone*)  
Bruce Allpress (*blind piano tuner*)  
Cliff Curtis (*Mana*)  
Carla Rupuha (*Heni*)  
Mahina Tunui (*Mere*)  
Hori Ahipene (*Mutu*)  
Gordon Hatfield (*Te Kori*)  
Mere Boynton (*Chief Nile’s daughter*)  
Kirsten Batley (*Marama*)  
Tania Burney (*Mahina*)  
Annie Edwards (*Te Tiwha*)  
Harina Haare (*Roimata*)  
Christina Harimate (*Parearau*)  
Steve Kanuta (*Amohia*)  
P.J. Karauria (*Taua*)  
Sonny Kirikiri (*Tame*)  
Alain Makiha (*Kahutia*)  
Greg Mayor (*Tipi*)  
Neil Mika Gudsell (*Tahu*)  
Guy Moana (*Kohuru*)  
Joseph Otimi (*Rehia*)  
Glynis Paraha (*Mairangi*)  
Riki Pickering (*Rongo*)  
Eru Potaka-Dewes (*Pitama*)  
Liane Rangi Henry (*Te Ao*)  
Huihana Rewa (*Te Hikumutu*)  
Tamati Rice (*Pito*)  
Paora Sharples (*Hotu*)  
George Smallman (*Tuu*)  
Kereama Teua (*Te Kukuni*)  
Poamo Tuialii (*Kahu*)  
Susan Tuialii (*Pare*)  
Kahumanu Waaka (*Waimiria*)  
Lawrence Wharerau (*Kamira*)  
Eddie Campbell, Roger Goodburn, Stephen Hall, Greg Johnson, Wayne McGoram (*seamen*)  
Jon Brazier (*wedding photographer*)  
Stephen Papps (*Bluebeard*)  
Nicola Baigent, Ruby Codner, Karen Colston, Verity George, Julie Steele (*Bluebeard’s wives*)  
Tim Raby, Jon Sperry (*taunting men*)  
Isobel Dryburgh, Harina Haare, Claire Lourie, Rose Mclvor, Amber Main, Rachel Main (*angels*)  
Sean Abraham, Tomas Dryburgh, Simon Knight-Jones, Julian Lee, Daniel Lunn (*cloud carrier boys*)  
Barbara Grover (*school hall piano player*)  
Arthur Ranford (*school hall violin player*)  
Nicola Baigent (*Sunday school teacher*)  
Rob Ellis, Terrence Garbolino, William Matthew (*young wives’ husbands*)  
Nancy Flyger (*maid*)  
George Boyle (*Flora’s grandfather*)  
Flynn (*Flynn, Baines’s dog*)

Australia/France 1992©  
121 mins

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