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Jane and Emma

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Jane and Emma
Directed by Chantelle Squires
Excel Entertainment, 2018

Reviewed by Camlyn Giddins

As I entered the Jordan Commons theater for the Salt Lake City premiere of *Jane and Emma*, I quickly got the sense that this event was bigger than I had imagined. I recognized several well-known entertainers and political and religious leaders who were in attendance. Crowds of people lined up to get a picture with the lead actors or have them sign a poster. There was so much buzzing as people conversed and connected with one another that the film didn't start on time.

Finally, Excel Entertainment Group executive Arthur Van Wagenen walked to the front of the theater and welcomed everyone. He immediately invited members of the production team to join him. Among them were a host of women: director Chantelle Squires, actresses Danielle Deadwyler and Emily Goss, screenwriter Melissa Leilani Larson, and producers Tamu Smith and Zandra Vranes. Surrounded by these friends, Van Wagenen recounted the development of their relationship as they began meeting and creating this story. Then with emotion, Van Wagenen said, "These women are going to change the way we do storytelling."

As a woman, as a person of color, and as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I am relieved that I can genuinely recommend *Jane and Emma* as a quality film—unique, significant, and relevant to the needs of our day. The strength of the film can be found in its story and content, casting and production team, soundtrack, cinematography, and driving purpose.

The film opens with text introducing the year, 1844, and our starring character, Jane Manning. It describes Jane as a free black woman who found a new faith and built her life around it—a description stripped of all things that would segregate her from other denominations or human experiences. Then we are thrown into a forested dream sequence in

which Jane hears Emma Smith call her name. Stumbling through branches and shadows, Jane calls back to Emma. As Jane startles awake, her sister asks what she saw in her dream—as if it were a frequent occurrence. Jane shares that she needs to go back to Nauvoo, Illinois, where Emma and the main body of Saints lived.

Around July of 1844, about three weeks before the night of that dream, Jane had left Nauvoo for Burlington, Iowa, in order to find more work for her and her sister, away from the persecutions she found among the Saints.¹ But, rising from the dream, Jane immediately packs up and travels the thirty miles back to Nauvoo. Finally, Jane arrives at what came to be known in Nauvoo as the Mansion House, the home of Joseph and Emma Smith.² As the prophet and leader of this self-built religious community, Joseph Smith and his wife Emma used their home as a hotel and often welcomed guests. But when Jane knocks, no one comes to the door. Jane, being familiar with the home, decides to enter through the back.

Very shortly, Jane sees the prophet lying on a table, covered with a linen sheet. She realizes he has been killed. While we are introduced to Jane through a visionary dream, we are introduced to Emma's character through a close-up of her steady hand cradling a revolver. Alone in the house, Emma is unaware of who has entered, but she is prepared. Luckily, Emma sees Jane's face before anything unfortunate happens. We learn that Emma is alone by choice, watching over her husband's body. She has sent away Joseph's other wives as well as brethren of the Church who desire to move his body to another location. Jane chooses to stay with Emma for the night. They both keep watch, braced for any mobs seeking the bounty on Joseph's head.

The rest of the film follows the events of that night. Intimate moments as well as confrontations spark flashbacks that tell us the story of how Jane and Emma's lives intertwine. The film also shows the depth of Emma's yearning for more time alone with the man she has always had to share. By the time morning comes, we've journeyed far enough to

1. James Goldberg, "The Autobiography of Jane Manning James: Seven Decades of Faith and Devotion," December 11, 2013, <https://history.lds.org/article/jane-manning-james-life-sketch?lang=eng>; see also James Goldberg and Veronica J. Anderson, eds., "Autobiography of Jane Elizabeth Manning James," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 156 herein.

2. "Mansion House, Nauvoo, Illinois," Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, accessed November 14, 2018, <http://mormonhistoricsites.org/mansion-house/>.

understand the significance of Jane supportively grasping Emma's hand as she finally steps outside to face the encroaching, mournful public.

According to existing records, Jane staying with Emma that night, helping keep vigil over Joseph's body, is not historical, but some of the basic framework of the story is.³ Through flashbacks we see how faithfully Jane led her family to Nauvoo to join their new religion. We see Emma thrive as the first lady in this growing community. We see Jane begin to live and work alongside Emma in running the hotel. We see Jane's developing relationship with the favorable Isaac James. We even see Emma's earnest invitation to adopt Jane into their family. All of these events are supported by historical records, and particularly Jane's own autobiography.⁴

The film does not shy away from confrontations. In one flashback, we see a white woman enter the Smith home without looking at or acknowledging Jane who opens the door. The woman proceeds to speak directly to Emma about borrowing the "girl" for some work. Instead of letting Jane speak for herself, Emma explains that Jane is not hers to lend but that the woman is welcome to hire Jane for her excellent work. Shocked, the woman asks if the Smiths pay Jane for her labor. Emma confirms, and the woman, still processing this information, leaves. There is silence between Jane and Emma as they continue working. Jane is visibly bothered by something. We later learn why.

This interaction is comparable to a later flashback involving the Prophet Joseph. A clerk from the Church begins telling Jane how the curse of Cain would not allow for her to be baptized. Joseph cuts him off and firmly corrects what has been said with a monologue I will not spoil. But in effect, he describes Jane as a daughter of God and ends with "to curse the negro is to tempt damnation." When the clerk leaves, Joseph says to Jane, "That should not have happened. I'm sorry." He then promises Jane that when the temple is finished, he and Emma will personally escort her in themselves. Emma's soft response and lack of correction still left Jane painted as a laborer, which contrasts with Joseph's direct chastisement. In Jane's mind, while Emma did not quite see Jane as an equal, Joseph truly saw her as a sister and was not afraid to defend her and to be seen as her

3. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 494–508.

4. For the full text of Jane Manning's autobiography, see Goldberg and Anderson, eds., "Autobiography," 151–66 herein.

brother. In the film, Emma desires to reconcile this and be the true sister she hopes to be.

The lead roles of Jane Manning, Emma Smith, and Joseph Smith are not played by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This may have allowed the actors to enact the roles with what they know from human experience and without prescribed ideas of who these individuals were. The performance of Brad Schmidt, who plays Joseph Smith, is an example of this. Having little time to research the role, Schmidt's approach to Joseph made the character affable and perhaps more relaxed than Latter-day Saint audiences have seen before. I consider that delivery to be a gift.

Danielle Deadwyler, who plays Jane, brings an appropriate groundedness to the role. If you were to watch or read any of her interviews, this depth of connection seems to come not only from acting but from who she is. A tribute to both the writing and the acting, Emma's character (played by Emily Goss) is portrayed with satisfying strength as well. This strength is present in her role as both the grieving widow and the active partner we see in the flashbacks. It's refreshing to see that, though in the midst of terrible loss, Emma does not dissolve in the same way I might have.

The music Mauli Jr. Bonner arranged for *Jane and Emma* is exceptional. It's not melodramatic in the sense that it elicits strong emotions out of the viewers. Rather, the music is meant to personify Jane's spirit. It is driven and culturally fitting. Not even four minutes of the film pass before you hear the deep, rich tones of gospel music move Jane on her journey. This rhythmic, ancestral presence is woven throughout the entire film.

I wish I could elaborate more eloquently on Wes Johnson's cinematography, but I found that it did not call attention to itself—and that's the beauty of it. It respectfully supported the characters, their relationships, and their storytelling. Contrastingly, I *do* notice the cinematography of lower-budget films about Latter-day Saints that seem to humbly say, "This is the best we could do with our resources." But if this was a low-budget film, I could not tell. Seeing that Johnson's experience with cinematography is primarily in action and thriller films, I was impressed that his work presented in *Jane and Emma* left me feeling intimately connected to the dynamic relationship of the two leading women.

This tribute to cinematography can't be isolated from the editing that pieced it together. I am still amazed by Chantelle Squires, who not only directed this film but also edited the story and footage together. *Jane*

and Emma is Squires's narrative directorial debut. Her previous directing role was for a documentary titled *Reserved to Fight* (2008) about four marines and their reintegration to civilian life. To successfully move from a war documentary to *Jane and Emma* speaks to Squires's ability to reach into a story, intimately and respectfully, and listen to its stylistic needs.

In the midst of all the strengths, I did find flaws. Aesthetically, the makeup on Emma and Jane (and even Joseph) was too noticeable and took me out of the time period. I was also disappointed that whenever other women from the Church, or even Joseph's other wives, were depicted, they were often sitting, silent, while knitting or sewing. I am keenly aware of the female progressive activists from our early Church years, and I look forward to seeing them portrayed more. Perhaps the intent of such omissions was not to detract from Jane and Emma's relationship.

Surprisingly, the climax seemed forced. After a long night of ministering to Emma, as her dream had inspired her to do, Jane is found in the middle of the forest during a storm. She prays to God, saying she doesn't know where she is supposed to be or what he would have her do. Emma calls her name, and Jane, as if only now connecting the dots, says Emma's name. Did Jane forget the dream that sent her to Nauvoo? The dream seemed too literal and recent for Jane to be confused.

As is usually the case, several articles and statements claim that this is not a "Mormon" film. To be honest, I don't entirely know what is meant by that. Perhaps that's a discussion for another article. The subject matter and context is definitely a part of the Church's history, though the film does speak to topics that extend beyond that sphere. At the Salt Lake premiere, for example, nonmember actress Emily Goss stated that she approached her role as Emma with the thought that she was portraying an important legend within American history.

To speak to the film's significance and driving purpose, I will just invite reflection: How often, in our media and our Church meetings, do we inquire into the experiences of our Saints of color? Do we wonder what keeps them from coming to Church? Do we ask them what makes it hard to stay? Many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints do not know of the relationship Emma and Joseph had with Jane, one of the earliest black converts to the Church. If members don't know it, then non-Latter-day Saints especially don't know it. Yet members of any faith can learn much from the exchanges between the socially segregated disciples in our history.

The night of the Salt Lake premiere, producer Zandra Vranes commented that *Jane and Emma* was made for this cultural time in order to invite us to “build relationships and become more than friendly and become true friends.” Jane Manning James is a rich example of having faith in God. You certainly get a sense of that faith through her actions and visionary experiences, though the film may not explore her personal relationship with God as deeply as some may like. But the intent of the film is more about confronting us and encouraging us to look at and improve our relationships with our neighbors—which is the same as strengthening our faith in God anyway.

Camlyn Giddins graduated from BYU with a BA in media arts. She currently teaches high school film and photography at Walden School of Liberal Arts in Provo, Utah, while also working on educational media and freelance film projects.