

Jane and Emma
Directed by Chantelle Squires
Excel Entertainment, 2018

Reviewed by Eric Samuelson

The new film *Jane and Emma* is about the friendship between Jane Manning and Emma Smith. The film is loosely historical, based on the limited writings that Jane left behind, but though some aspects of the story are imagined, the film speaks to many facts about Latter-day Saint history that we know to be true. The film openly acknowledges, for instance, the fact of Nauvoo polygamy and Joseph Smith's multiple wives. It sympathetically depicts Emma Smith, who must surely be one of the most equivocally viewed figures in the early history of the Church. And central to the film's thematic concerns is the tangled and contentious history of race relations in Latter-day Saint history. It presents early converts as sharing the unabashedly racist worldview of nineteenth-century Americans, and it prefigures the ways in which the most retrograde notions of race and privilege would continue to impact Latter-day Saint culture and thought going forward from Joseph Smith's martyrdom. Despite, and perhaps because of, the difficult issues the film addresses, I would describe the film as faith inspiring and powerfully spiritual.

The film imagines the night of June 28, 1844, one day after Joseph Smith's murder. In Nauvoo, Illinois, Emma (Emily Goss) has refused to allow anyone else into her home, guarding Joseph's body alone. Her former servant, Jane Manning (Danielle Deadwyler), asks if she can wait with her; the film is about that night, two women, alone, and the difficult conversations they had not previously felt able to share. The events of that one night make up perhaps 70 percent of the film; the rest consists of flashbacks, in which we see the beginnings and evolution of their relationship. In the flashbacks, we also meet a charismatic Joseph Smith (Brad Schmidt) and witness his dynamic leadership and, at times, challenging and difficult teachings. Jane was also, during this time, courted by Isaac James (K. Danor Gerald), whom she would

eventually marry, and he proposes, not for the first time, during the long night of the film.

The film is, first and foremost, about journeys. We see Jane's long walk with the nine faithful members of her family, including her son, from her home in Wilton, Connecticut, to Nauvoo. They intend to take the steamboat from Buffalo, New York, but are not allowed to board because of their race and are therefore obliged to walk the eight hundred or so miles. When her party arrives in Nauvoo, their shoes are mere scraps and their feet are bloody. But Emma and Joseph make them welcome. Tellingly, the other members gathered in the Nauvoo House emphatically do not.

There are other journeys. Joseph lends Jane a horse when she leaves to find employment; a thuggish lout steals it from her, and again, she walks. She again travels to be with Emma for their one night together. And the entire film is about a journey, the journey of the Church itself after the martyrdom and the journey of America in those crucial and ugly and contentious years before the Civil War. Above all, the film describes the personal journeys of Jane and Emma, of two women working through pain and heartbreak, finding their truth together.

I rather suspect that the historical Joseph wasn't quite as "woke" as this film portrays him. In the film, Joseph shares some remarkably anti-racist sentiments and forcibly defends Jane against racism. Schmidt's performance captures Joseph's open kindness but elides the complexities of the man underneath that veneer. The film creates the impression that opposition to racism was perhaps central to his ministry, which I suspect is not wholly accurate historically, but the film isn't particularly interested in capturing some essentialist Joseph Smith but in Joseph as Jane knew him. He was kind to her and defended her from the open racism of some Nauvoo townspeople. So that's the Joseph we see in this film.

But the focus is almost always on Jane, and that places the responsibility for carrying the film directly on Deadwyler. She is absolutely up to it. Her walk, her carriage, and her body language carry the portrayal. In group shots, she's not always in the center of the frame, but her presence is unmistakable and compelling. And her face has the focus and intensity that speaks to an earned pride her society would have denied her. Director Chantelle Squires loves tight close-ups, with lots of hand-held camera work, mostly on Deadwyler and the emotional directness of her remarkable eyes. It's a tremendous screen performance, one that validates and honors the historical Jane.

Above all, I love the way *Deadwyler* captures Jane's intelligence. Jane sees the world clearly and reasons her way to the heart of several matters, and she knows that her conclusions are valid. She knows, for example, that Isaac James loves her, and she is willing to love him in return, but she has no intention of committing herself blindly. He wants to move to the frontier West, where he believes he will find opportunities for individual achievement not available to him in Illinois or further east. He seems to think of the West as a place of boundless promise, free from discrimination. Jane seems to know better. His priorities are not her priorities, and though she understands his deep need for accomplishment and achievement, the world is what it is for young black men. He's going to get hurt and she as well, and she wants to be sure of him before agreeing to that journey. She knows that Emma is kind to her and that she can rely on that kindness up to a point. But she also knows that Emma does not see her as an equal, as a sister in the gospel, but rather as an inferior to whom kindness is a kind of reflexive noblesse oblige.

Jane also knows her own worth, her inherent value. She has reason to believe that Joseph sees it too, that despite what nearly everyone in nineteenth-century America believes, she is equal, she is loved by her Heavenly Father, she is only a hewer of wood and drawer of water through a grotesque accident of history, unrelated to any false theological construct. She is not Emma's "girl." She is Emma's sister and friend.

I have yet to discuss Emma and Emily Goss's fine performance. For the most part, this is Emma at the most difficult and painful time in her life: after the death of her husband, a death for which the Saints hold her partly complicit. And she may very well be, she thinks. She did, after all, write to Joseph and urge him to return and face Governor Ford, leading to his arrest, incarceration in Carthage, and death. Jane reassures Emma, however, that she is not to blame. Goss plays Emma as a deeply distressed woman, fiercely defending what she sees as her prerogatives as Joseph's widow, while painfully aware of other women who have grounds to consider themselves identically situated. And so we see an Emma who has been stretched to her emotional limits by grief, by pain, by guilt, and under it all, by a deeply rooted feeling of betrayal. She is close to the edge of madness, and the film suggests that without Jane's sturdy sanity to ground her, she may well have slipped over the edge.

But of course, this isn't the only Emma we see. In the flashbacks, we see Emma the theologian, Emma the highly respected and strong leader of Nauvoo's women, and Emma the compassionate individual, defending Jane and giving her employment, without ever quite granting her

equality. And yet, even equality is possible, we think. Emma Smith is, of course, a difficult subject for historians of the Church, even today. I thought this film gave us, ultimately, a sympathetic portrayal of an exceptionally complex character. Goss's performance matches and complements Deadwyler's.

I found the film not just well acted and written. It also manages likely audience sensitivities while telling a difficult-to-tell story about our past, striking a most difficult balance. Credit, first, goes to Melissa Leilani Larson's screenplay, which honors the history in which the story is rooted while fictionalizing when needed. It is a film for today, reflecting our tensions and concerns. And the key to its achievement can be found in the title. The film is called *Jane and Emma*. It's a film about Jane Manning first and Emma Smith second. The film focuses more on the woman who served in the Smith household than it does on her employer, more on the marginalized woman of color than her privileged white town leader, and more on the woman on the periphery of Nauvoo society than the woman who served as president of the Relief Society. That shift in emphasis is crucial and allows us to see the ways that Jane Manning was extraordinary. Her faithfulness, tenacity, and courage, as played by Deadwyler, are precisely why the film is so inspirational.

Ultimately, this is a film about the relationship between two beautifully drawn women. That's a rare enough achievement. It's wonderfully well written by perhaps Mormondom's finest young playwright and directed by a director of almost limitless potential. I should also mention Squires's use of music. The film's score, by Mauli Jr. Bonner and Jonathan Keith, is entirely gospel music, and it's wonderful and underscores the action throughout. The film is fantastic and could hold its own with the best films I would expect to see at Sundance or Cannes. There have surely been times when I have thought, "For a Mormon film, that's not bad," and made allowances for good intentions. Not this time. This film is just plain good.

But I'm a Latter-day Saint film scholar and can only evaluate it through my own cultural lens. I think this film is an example of how our newfound openness about Latter-day Saint history and culture works. We are just beginning to process difficult questions of our history, and *Jane and Emma* does for Latter-day Saint film what Richard Lyman Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling* did for Latter-day Saint history—it shows us what's possible if we can overcome defensiveness and cultural insularity. (I'm writing of Church membership at large, not the community of fine Latter-day Saint historians.) Once it was possible to pretend that Joseph

Smith did not practice plural marriage, that racial questions had not risen or that they had already been resolved, or that controversies over race were overblown or artifacts of propaganda by ill-intentioned folk working to destroy the work in which we were engaged. In our current information age, however, those approaches are no longer tenable. *Jane and Emma* is a film that says, yes, Joseph was married to many women in Nauvoo, many of them very young. And he lived in a racist society, and that racism has continued to plague us for many generations. And yet there's also this: the example of one astonishingly faithful woman whom we find inspiring, a woman whose life can still testify to our soul. Hallelujah.

Eric Samuelsen is a Mormon playwright and former BYU professor. He received a BA in theater from BYU in 1983 and a PhD in dramatic history, theory, and criticism from Indiana University in 1991. He has written more than two dozen plays, including *Gadanton* and *A Love Affair with Electrons*, and has been called a Mormon Henrik Ibsen or Charles Dickens. He has won several awards from the Association for Mormon Letters for his works and served as president of that organization. In 2012 he received the Smith Pettit Award for lifetime work.