



Anne Hathaway as Jane Austen in *Becoming Jane*

Literary Love

Not quite Austen, but not bad

BECOMING JANE: Directed by Julian Jarrold. Written by Sarah Williams and Kevin Hood. Cinematography, Eigil Bryld. Music, Adrian Johnston. Starring Anne Hathaway, James McAvoy, Julie Walters, James Cromwell, Maggie Smith, Joe Anderson and Lucy Cohu. Miramax Films, 2007. PG-13. 112 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

A tangle of biography, imagination and borrowed scenes from Jane Austen's novels, *Becoming Jane* sets out early and firmly to establish our heroine as *different*. She wears rich jewel tones that contrast brightly with everyone else's garb; she walks meaningfully apart on the way to church. She wakes everyone up in the morning with her impassioned piano playing and is good at cricket. And, of course, she wants to marry for love (sometimes it seems as if every young lady in a pretty English period piece has the same notion). Naturally,

Jane's brother Henry (Joe Anderson), and he nettles Jane from the get-go by being insufficiently impressed with her writing. He gets lost in the woods; she half-heartedly tries to leave him there, irritated and bitter. The way the pair's bickering gently merges into flirtation is one of *Becoming Jane's* strengths, and it is buoyed on the chemistry between willowy, wide-eyed Hathaway and McAvoy, who has an intensity of presence in even his smaller roles. The film's sense of possibility and growth is strongest when the space between Jane and Tom is the focal point — when they're sharing a dance or sneakily brushing fingertips on a stairwell. The air between them virtually bubbles and fizzes. But social customs, rules, money and family all play their expected parts in the path Jane and Tom's relationship takes as they stumble toward happiness and then away again.

Becoming Jane is a story that fits awkwardly on the big screen, alternating lovely scenery with too-heavily symbolic shots like those of rain hitting windows (bad news is coming) or storm clouds (the news is worse than you thought). There is nothing wrong with imagining Jane Austen as one of her own heroines, and perhaps there is something right about it — the story is drawn from a handful of references to Lefroy in Jane's correspondence; apparently she once danced with him three times, when two dances was the proper limit. But the film can't quite create a believable connection between romance and writing, between Jane's two passions. It perkily suggests that Mr. Lefroy is, perhaps, Mr. Darcy; that with *Pride and Prejudice* Jane gave herself a happier ending. It's a sweet notion, but it feels too simple. *Becoming Jane's* romance is convincing, but its relationship to the very real and accomplished Jane Austen is tenuous. It borrows Austen's themes and her history, but never manages to convincingly tie her inspiration to the pretty young face of Tom Lefroy. Perhaps this is simply because the growth and change of a writer's mind is a tricky thing to depict on screen. Watching someone write is dull, but reading those words can be transporting. *Becoming Jane* falls right in the middle: simply diverting, for a time.

EW

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this doesn't sit well with the Austen parents — played by Julie Walters, doing fiery maternal as she does so well, and James Cromwell, a solid and warm father who both sympathizes with his daughter and understands his wife's concern. The rich neighbor lady's favorite nephew wants to marry Jane (Anne Hathaway). How could there be any question as to whether she'd accept?

The question arrives in the form of Tom Lefroy (James McAvoy). Saucy, self-indulgent, dashing, literate Lefroy is friends with

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