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Anya Taylor-Joy and Bringing 'Questionable Intent' to Jane Austen

Anya Taylor-Joy and Autumn de Wilde explain why it was at last time to bring Emma Woodhouse to life in all her complexity.

By [David Crow](#)

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Photo: Focus Features

There are moments when Anya Taylor-Joy is still jolted awake in the middle of the night with a strange epiphany: she played Emma Woodhouse. To be sure, the English-American-Argentinian actor is aware she donned the costumes of Jane Austen's most devilish heroine only last year. She also knows she is doing press for the finished film when we meet one brisk morning outside Central Park. But sitting on a drawing room couch, and underneath a comfy-looking blanket, the star is

reflective about what a whirlwind it's been jumping into her first comedy—and an adaptation of a beloved yet elusive literary icon.

“My brain does this very clever thing, I think,” Taylor-Joy says, “which is it either doesn't really let me know what's going on or it doesn't impress upon me the importance of a situation, because otherwise I'd be in my bathroom screaming.” Hence how she can go from getting a cold call about meeting with a first-time director for a new *Emma* adaptation to agreeing the next day with filmmaker Autumn de Wilde that they'll take a stab at a protagonist who's thwarted many a previous leading lady.

“From the second I met Autumn, it was happening,” Taylor-Joy says. “It feels like I have been kidnapped, but by the best people possible.”

Chief among these pleasant hijackers is de Wilde, a lifelong photographer and music videographer who sought *only* Taylor-Joy to play the versatile Ms. Woodhouse. She confirms as much when we meet with her on another morning, revealing she even pitched *Emma*. to Working Title Films and Blueprint Pictures with Taylor-Joy's name as part of the presentation.

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“To me if you imagine this person as this [character], it changes your point-of-view of how the character's always been represented,” de Wilde says over coffee. “And Anya so successfully created a character in *The Witch* of questionable intent—you completely believe she's the victim, then slowly throughout the movie you start wondering if she's actually the villain. What is she, 19? It was so masterful because her choices aren't based on vanity; she's extraordinarily beautiful but the story comes first.”

And with *Emma*, de Wilde saw an opportunity to reverse engineer the “questionable intent” of *The Witch*'s Thomasin character, whereby a seemingly imperious person now learns humility. It's telling de Wilde refers to Emma Woodhouse as an anti-heroine.

Such perspective is a departure from previous film and television adaptations of the Austen novel, and it appears to be a smart one. As the first woman to direct a full-on adaptation of this book, de Wilde leans into the sardonic witticism of Austen's prose, which has frequently been reduced to

something frivolous or wilting in the past. Yet this is a story about which Austen herself mused: “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.”

Says Taylor-Joy, “When I first met Autumn, I mentioned that quote to her, and I said, ‘I only want to do this if I have free rein to really go into this [aspect].’ Because I want people when watching *Emma* to feel every emotion towards her. I want them to want to reach into the screen and shake her. I want them to put their heads in their hands and go, ‘What did you just do?!’”

It’s a blend of emotions that Taylor-Joy has long had for *Emma* since first reading the novel at the age of 11, and rereading it many times since. It’s also an instinct de Wilde shares as another woman of English heritage who cannot even remember the first time she picked up the book; she just recalls marveling at its depiction of a woman so ahead of her 1815 setting.

“I think Jane Austen wrote the best fantasy stories,” de Wilde says, “and I think cathartic change seems to be a big theme for her characters. In Austen’s time, women weren’t even allowed to be funny or witty in conversation, so I think in creating a character that was financially independent and had a father that didn’t want her to marry, it was pretty rebellious.”

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By David Crow

The broad strokes of *Emma* are well known: a young woman who is “handsome, clever, and rich” upends the sleepy village of Highbury. Her father, who is typically portrayed as a hypochondriac—though de Wilde has Bill Nighy depict him as more of a justifiably worried valetudinarian after his wife’s death—remains oblivious to his daughter playing matchmaker amongst her friends and peers... or that she’s unintentionally romancing her brother-in-law Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn) one quarrel at a time.

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These elements remain in 2020's *Emma.*, however, de Wilde suggests she brings from her own childhood an emphasis on the relationship between Emma and Harriet Smith (Mia Goth), whom Emma turns into a personal guinea pig.

Says de Wilde, "I think female friendships, that first best friend, is a powerful love and often maybe the biggest heartbreak before their first true love. The character of Harriet was really important to me... because I feel like Emma chooses a new puppy but she doesn't realize how much she needs that friend."

Taylor-Joy agrees, noting how their *Emma.* puts as much emphasis on the pain created by pushing Harriet toward ill-advised courtships.

"They do become in love with each other, and when Emma and Harriet break up and have that argument, we always referred to that as the biggest breakup in the movie," Taylor-Joy says. "It wasn't Knightley yelling at Emma; it was Emma realizing she'd done something wrong and Harriet moving away from her. That's heartbreaking."

Still, *Emma* is nothing if not a comedy of manners, and no one would accuse the star or director of losing that thread. Rather they emphasize it with an almost musical use of language and a mischievous disposition. But then grandiloquence suits Taylor-Joy just fine.

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"My debutante ball of how to perform in an accent was *The Witch*," she reflects, "and when you think about the way that those sentences were crafted, you're painting pictures. I've never understood why people find it difficult to speak in that kind of language, because you are literally storytelling with choice words. With Jane Austen, it's fascinating because they couldn't really hit

somebody over the head with language if they were angry. They could just say it with the word choice that they had, and I just luxuriated in it.”

Her director refers to this verbal sparring as actors needing to play two scenes: one with the dialogue and one without.

“[There] was the story being told by what was being said, but we also established the story being told by [the words] they weren’t saying,” de Wilde explains. “Sometimes those were two totally different stories.” Thus her satisfaction from having a star who can exude cunning and eventual wisdom—a questionable intent.

When we read back de Wilde’s praise for Taylor-Joy’s penchant for inhabiting moral flexibility, the star is flattered if a little amused.



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She then observes, “I think I do a lot of internal work in my acting. If you were to freeze-frame it... you would say I’m not doing very much with my face. But when I was working with M. Night Shyamalan, he really taught me to just think the thoughts and they will appear on your face. So I think anything you’re reading off Emma, off Thomasin, off of anything, is just me thinking through all of these thoughts.”

Those thoughts, and her ability to express them, have brought her into collaboration with a plethora of emerging talent. In addition to working with de Wilde on *Emma.*, she played a burgeoning femme fatale in Cory Finley’s Sundance breakout, *Thoroughbreds*, and can next be seen in Edgar Wright’s psychological horror movie, *Last Night in Soho*. And then, of course, there’s the

collaboration that helped lead to all others, Robert Eggers and *The Witch*. It's a working relationship she's continuing in the near future as she reteams with the indie auteur for the upcoming Viking-based drama, *The Northman*.

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“It feels like going home, and I am so excited because we’ve all stayed so close,” she says about the project. “They’re my family, so to be in a situation where we get to be creative together again will be incredible. Obviously *The Lighthouse* was amazing, but I was like, ‘What do you mean there’s no female role in it for me?’ and [Eggers] said, ‘Well, there’s a mermaid but she’s really naked, so not your role! You’ll have to wait for the next one!’ So I’m just so glad to be reteaming with my men.”

In the meantime though, she’s teamed with women in a story written by women, and now, finally, directed by a woman.

“I don’t think we get very many female anti-hero leads,” de Wilde considers. “I really love anti-hero movies, and I think to have the opportunity to have a female lead who is unlikable and lovable is such an amazing opportunity.”

Emma. is in limited release now and opens nationwide on March 6.

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David Crow is the movies editor at Den of Geek. He has long been proud of his geek credentials. Raised on cinema classics that ranged from...