THE TV ADAPTATION OF *DEATH COMES TO PEMBERLEY*, P. D. JAMES’S AUSTEN SEQUEL, HITS BRITISH SCREENS AT CHRISTMAS AND IS EXPECTED TO BE BROADCAST IN THE UNITED STATES EARLY NEXT YEAR. ANNE HORNER SPEAKS TO SOME OF THOSE INVOLVED

Death Comes to Pemberley

The woods of Pemberley are to be polluted this winter as a character from *Pride & Prejudice* is killed and another is put on trial for murder. The BBC is dramatising P. D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley*, the novel in which the queen of crime imagines what happens to the characters six years on. Although James didn't please everyone with her *P&P* sequel, she seems to have got away with murder, with her daring reimagining of this much-loved book pleasing many Jane Austen lovers and book critics alike.

And now there’s another scary task for a writer: rewriting P. D. James’s rewriting Austen. Who’s up to the challenge? Step forward Juliette Towhidi, co-screenwriter of the 2003 hit film *Calendar Girls*. Towhidi agrees that it is a big ask. “When you are a scriptwriter you have the great advantage of locking yourself away in your room and being able to kid yourself that it’s just you and your computer and your books. It’s only when you emerge and things kick in that you think ‘Oh, my goodness, this is actually happening’.”

Did she quake when she landed the job? After all, as Simon Reade, who adapted *P&P*

Matthew Rhys stars as Mr Darcy in *Death Comes to Pemberley*, which is on BBC TV this Christmas
Towhidi says: “This was a bit different because obviously it’s not a direct adaptation of Jane Austen, and you are entering uncharted territory to a certain extent because it is six years after Darcy and Elizabeth have got married. What P.D. James has done so brilliantly is to develop the characters in a way that feels very true to who they are but spinning it slightly into a different genre.

“I had a fine line to tread in that marriage between James and Jane Austen. James is a crime writer and Austen very decidedly isn’t. I think what James did so brilliantly was to take the characters and that wonderful irony, that tone, the wry humour of the prose, and capture that. And I suppose what I went back to Jane Austen for more was that sparkle, and the slightly different tone in Pride & Prejudice. My job really was to get a little bit more of Pride & Prejudice back in the TV series.”

This promises some delights for the TV viewer, in particular a cameo role for Penelope Keith as Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Keith’s portrayal of the snobbish sitcom characters Margo Leadbetter in The Good Life and Audrey fforbes-Hamilton in To the Manor Born were massive hits with British TV audiences in the 1970s and 1980s.

Towhidi explains: “Lady Catherine was in the P.D. James book but as writing a couple of letters. So we really wanted to bring her to life, again because it’s a visual medium and people perhaps feel a bit short-changed on television by a letter.

“The thinking for the TV adaptation was we have this wonderful story that James put out, but an audience coming to this is going to want to also get a sense of the scope of the characters, the characters that they love the most from Pride & Prejudice. Mrs Bennet wasn’t there and we felt that television would be missing a trick if we didn’t have her in and we came down very much on the side of yes we would. There are liberties that I’ve taken like that with James’s book. And I think she’s happy with those changes because we felt that for television it’s a different medium again. That was one of the challenges where I had to somehow tread the line between Jane Austen and James anew if you like.”

How happy was James to have her work rewritten? “She read the scripts obviously at key moments. We didn’t want to inflict endless drafts on her, but she read the scripts and she gave us feedback because obviously she’d researched things really thoroughly from her side. She gave some very useful notes, mainly around authenticity, which were really helpful and she came on to the set and visited a couple of times and came to dinner.

“I think I’m right in saying she’s very happy with the whole thing and she had delightful visits to the set. It is really important that she feels we’ve done right by her work. It’s always difficult for book writers because inevitably their work has to change, it has to be made to work in a different medium, so when you get a happy author that’s a good thing.”

How did Towhidi land the job? “I had worked with David Thompson from Origin Pictures [the independent production company behind Death Comes to Pemberley] previously when he was head of BBC films and so he knew my work and we had a good working relationship in the past.

“I could see there was something new that needed to be done for the TV adaptation that was a lovely challenge for a writer. Adapting a Jane Austen book straight is a different thing, perhaps possibly more daunting in a way. I could see that there was a middle path I had to tread to get the TV adaptation in a new form yet again, and that was something I really relished the idea of.”

One of the key challenges was making sure that the relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth delivers. In P&P they spend much of the book sparring with each other as the sexual tension fizzes. Towhidi wanted to bring some of that famous tension back: “People are coming back wanting to see
Darcy and Elizabeth, you need to have some sparks going on between them, stuff at stake, suspense around their relationship, that’s all been in the mix.”

How successfully the Darcy-Elizabeth dynamic is will also be down to actors Anna Maxwell-Martin (Cassandra in the 2007 film Becoming Jane and Esther Summerson in the BBC’s 2005 adaptation of Bleak House) and Matthew Rhys (The Americans, The Mystery of Edwin Drood). It certainly sounds as if they have that vital spark. Towhid says: “They had a real laugh together, it was great seeing them, real chemistry. They are both wonderful actually I’ve just finished seeing the first cut of the first episode and it’s looking great.”

Later Rhys admits that he and Maxwell-Martin had a ball and that working with her was “dangerous because you laugh too much. I watched a few bits where I’m clearly just trying not to laugh. It’s one of those pairings of actors where you go ‘Oh no, we’re bad for each other, we’ll corpse each other’, which we did. We are similar, we both appreciate the same things, certainly the same humour, which is what got us in trouble.”

Maxwell-Martin previously said in an interview for The Sunday Times magazine that she and Rhys were both nervous of their roles. “To be honest, we’re both panicking actually I’ve just finished seeing the first cut of the first episode and it’s looking great.”

Of course Rhys has also to contend with the very big spectre of Colin Firth and that wet-shirt scene, recently voted the most memorable TV moment. So how did it feel for this actor, who is fiercely proud of being Welsh, to be donning the billowing white shirt of the English Darcy? Did Rhys ever think he’d be playing an Austen character?

“Never, never in a million years. And never Mr Darcy. I’m in The Americans [the TV spy series] and I do an American accent. But doing a posh English accent, to me it’s harder because the leap is bigger. You grow up watching American television and when you’re out with other kids in the garden inevitably you replicate it, you imitate an American accent, but you’re never out in the garden pretending to be a posh Englishman. If anything, especially in Wales, it was always an accent that prompted derision almost. So when I hear myself doing it, it feels incredibly disingenuous or sort of insincere, I feel like I’m pretending to be Lord Snooty or something. So I find it a very difficult accent to do, I have to admit.”

To a declaration of “We’ve got a Welsh Mr Darcy”, Rhys lets fire a round of laughter, an explosion of energy. “That makes me laugh in more ways than one. There were quite a few times when Dan [Percival], the director, came up and said ‘Let’s go again, [Matthew whispers imitating the director] It’s just a bit Welsh’ …

“One of the reasons I did it was because it wasn’t Pride & Prejudice, I don’t think I would have done Mr Darcy in Pride & Prejudice. But it’s a different Darcy. He’s six years on, he’s a father, he’s a happy man. In a way it was P&P because P&P is the blueprint to everything you want to know about the character. So that was the way in for me. “I love Darcy, I think he’s very sensitive. I think his arrogance and rudeness comes from incredible sensitivity and insecurity. I always try to find empathy with a character and I had an enormous amount for him.”

And for anyone who has empathy with Mrs Bennet, who in her youth liked a red coat very well, the good news is that we’ll be seeing quite a lot of Wickham. He’s played by Matthew Goode (Charles Ryder in the 2008 film of Brideshead Revisited). Wickham becomes a very big character and “gloriously so” says Rhys generously, stressing how Goode “plays him as a combination of Mick Jagger and Peter O’Toole”.

He adds: It was an incredibly fun production, maybe too much fun, we laughed a lot. With the likes of Trevor Eve [playing Sir Selwyn Hardcastle, a new character] and Matthew Goode, we probably laughed too much, I’ve got to be honest. I think we embraced it as much as we could while thinking ‘I can’t believe we’re playing this part’, there was a great sense of fun that we were, and that we were in a heatwave and in some amazing locations. It doesn’t get any better …”

But let’s get back to that distracting white shirt, how much does it hover over the role? Rhys says: “The boys and I were talking about white-shirt syndrome, as to whether
Colin Firth has been entirely responsible for it or whether it’s just become iconic in its romantic connotation. All the girls… if it was too hot at lunch we’d take our frock coats off, and we’d be in Mills & Boon billowy white shirts and the girls would always refer to it. We referred often to the white-shirt effect.

Rhys of course is no stranger to donning white shirts in costume drama, but Dickens is perhaps a more natural medium for him than Austen. In 2012 he was impressive in the BBC’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as the Byronic and brooding baddie John Jasper. And it is with this darkness that Rhys is clearly more at home than Darcy, the romantic lead. “John Jasper is one of Dickens’s most complex characters, there’s a lot going on there,” he says. “He was multifaceted and multilayered, not a clear-cut Dickensian character. You could understand where he came from, abandonment and his fixation. It was a brilliant part.

“Dickens, like Austen, like Shakespeare, has that incredible insight into humanity and writes very well for understanding the human spirit and all the rest and that’s why the characters are universal and why they’ve weathered so well. It’s not to dismiss Austen that she doesn’t know how to write darkness, she certainly does, but with Dickens it’s very apparent and very complex and very challenging, I love that.”

Were there any surprises for him in playing Darcy? “I saw him clearly when I read it and then in the playing of it I found it difficult to get there, so that was like a surprise to me how much I struggled with it. That was the unpleasant surprise. He’s a very different Darcy at the beginning, you see him as very happy and then he sort of reverts to old Darcy in a way. It read very clear and then the execution of it, there’s a lot more going on.”

After the death at the start of James’s book a more indecisive Darcy appears. The awfulness of the event seems to plunge Darcy into self-doubt, a very far cry from Darcy-the-fixer we see in the denouement of *P&P*. That Darcy doesn’t hesitate to act when Lydia elopes with Wickham.

Rhys says of his Darcy: “He’s kind of frozen in terror. What you sort of worry about is that a modern audience won’t understand how catastrophic the event
would have been. Chatsworth [where some of it was filmed] still has about 250 people working for the estate so an entire army depends on you. For the estate to be in that much jeopardy would have been catastrophic and I think the magnitude of it hits him like an express train at the beginning which is why he freezes and internalises again, which is why it disintegrates with Elizabeth and she has to pull him out, and she’s just like ‘How are we going to fix this?’”

What is Rhys expecting now that filming is complete? “A press hiding, probably a lashing in the British press. ‘Not a Firth’,” he declaims with spirit imagining the review headlines.

Towhid’s predictions are for a happier ending. Calendar Girls, the comedy about how the Women’s Institute raise money for charity by posing nude, was full of lively dialogue and characters. “You can make the most wonderful film or show in the world, but you have to feel the characters,” she says of her approach.

“I am drawn to stories that have light and shade in them, humour and wit and lightness, but also the darkness to anchor that. They are two sides of the same coin really in everyday life, so part of the reason I was very attracted to this is that it had the lightness of Pride & Prejudice and the wonderful characters, but there’s that darker edge. The idea of darkness encroaching on Pemberley. And it does have this wonderful satisfaction to it that it’s all resolved at the end. I don’t want to give too much away …”

And so all is set fair for a magnificent romp leading to the eventual purging of the woods of Pemberley after the pollution of a violent death and a murder trial. 🕊

The three-part adaptation of Death Comes to Pemberley is on BBC One over Christmas and on PBS in the United States in early 2014.