

## Document Citation

Title	<b>What is the power of love? Talking with Breaking the Waves' stars Emily Watson and Stellan Skarsgard</b>
Author(s)	Ngan Nguyen
Source	<i>Valley Vantage</i>
Date	1996 Nov 28
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	8
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Watson, Emily (1966), London, Great Britain Skarsgård, Stellan (1951), Gothenburg, Väergötland, Sweden
Film Subjects	Breaking the waves, Trier, Lars von, 1996



# What is the power of love?

## Talking with *Breaking the Waves* stars Emily Watson and Stellan Skarsgård

Interview by Ngan Nguyen

The prestigious Cannes Film Festival awarded *Breaking the Waves* the Grand Jury Prize this year. Despite the misleading title, it is not a surfing movie nor does it have anything to do with the ocean. What the movie is, with its subsequent awards and accolades, is proof that critics at film festivals have different criteria for reviewing movies



Emily Watson and Stellan Skarsgård as happy newlyweds in October Film's *Breaking the Waves*.

than us regular moviegoers. Don't get me wrong, the movie is not terrible. It's just a very long story (two hours and 40 minutes) about how a young, naive woman sexually gives her self to other men so that God can give her quadriplegic husband the use of his body.

The pure and innocent Bess, played magnificently by English actress Emily Watson, was raised in a strict religious sect in an isolated town in Scotland. When she marries an older and much more experienced oil rig worker, Jan (Stellan Skarsgård), she experiences love more passionately than she could have ever imagined. After he leaves for work on a rig several hundreds of miles off the coast, she is devastated and prays to God to bring her husband home as soon as possible. Unfortunately, her prayers are answered and he is sent home, nearly paralyzed from the neck down after an accident. Saddened that his sweet and loving wife will be deprived of carnal pleasure, he persuades her to take other lovers. Because of her strong religious faith and her fervent love for her husband, Bess is immediately outraged at the idea, but changes her mind after Jan tells her that every act of lust helps him recover. Being so naive to the point where the viewer questions her mental capacity, Bess obeys him and feels that this is the least she should do to prove to God her love for her husband.

Critics have praised the film for depicting an intensely powerful love story which will evoke equally intense reactions from the audience. If director Lars von Trier wanted his movie to be thought-provoking and cause discussions after the film, then he accomplished his mission. There are definitely trying moments in the theater where one wrestles with Bess' stubborn acts of love and definite moments outside of the theater with one wondering whether she was crazy or just extremely devoted. These reactions show the strength of Watson's debut film performance as Bess.

Watson, a Royal Shakespearean actress, glows on screen, a quality that was evident on her first screen test with Von Trier's and Skarsgård. "Your relationship with the camera was something Lars and I saw when you came in, the first time we laid eyes on you," Skarsgård informs Watson during an interview with both actors. "Because this

translucence you have is incredible and Lars said after the casting session, 'I know who it is and we have two more days left of trying girls,' and he was right. It's also you're brave, you're incredibly brave," Skarsgård continues in his Swedish accent, making Watson blush.

What is brave about Watson is the honesty and intensity in which she plays Bess, a tough, pull-no-punches role which could have easily been over-acted by a lesser actress. "The way to the character for me was to be as open as possible and to be as open hearted and vulnerable as I could be and to do that for two-and-a-half months is..." Watson starts, trying to find the word encapsulating her experience, "to exist at such a kind of pitch of emotional intensity is quite scary and quite shocking but it's also acting heaven. It's everybody's dream, being able to play a part like that where you can really go for it," she finishes in her sharp English accent.

Skarsgård, on the other hand, was the picture of restraint for most of the movie, strapped to a hospital bed and in a drug-induced haze. "I think Lars paralyzed me just to keep from overacting," Skarsgård jokes. "It's like a [continuous] close-up because you've just got your face but its frustrating because I'm a neurotic person who wants to pace all the time. I can't sit still and having to spend all day in bed is not what you're dreaming of," he adds.

The times in which he did move in bed (with Watson) were the most real portrayals of how embarrassing and funny sex can be in life. A perfect example is when Bess and Jan first have sex on their honeymoon night. It is not a steamy, softly filtered scene of a woman and man consummating their marriage but a brightly lit progression of awkward jerking movements and amusing glances.

"Usually when you see a sex scene in a film, people feel under the obligation to be sexy and its about titillation and its about glamour," Watson says. "As soon as there's an attraction between people, its all kind of sexy. And life isn't like that really. This girl has never seen a naked man before and she thinks its hilarious. It's so refreshingly honest and kind of warts and all and a kind of a what-on-earth-is-going-on-here situation that I think that's one of the things that's really lovely about the film. It's a towering passionate love story and yet it's not taking the sort of conventional route at all," she adds. "In the script initially, it was a much more conventionally written scene with Bess undressing and Jan watching her and we got there and Lars said, 'This doesn't work, this is boring. Emily, you sit down there and you watch him get undressed,' and it was hilarious," Watson recalls. "I thought I was sexy and you started laughing," Skarsgård interrupts, flashing a look of hurt and then a big smile.

The easy relationship between Skarsgård and Watson developed almost immediately since both were isolated on the dark and stormy west coast of Scotland with the rest of the cast and crew. The stark location and the level of her performance created such an intense glass bubble-atmosphere that Watson believes that this has been one of the most powerful experiences of her life. "When they said, 'Emily that's a wrap!' I sobbed for half an hour. It's a sense of relief and a sense of grief. It was such a huge experience, the whole thing, ...and then like other things you say, 'OK, bye then!'"

Because of her outstanding performance in *Breaking the Waves*, audiences will do doubt see Watson in many more film roles. Hopefully, the next movie she won't have to transcend the soap-operish content to receive the recognition.