

ON SET

love will tear us



SPOILER
ALERT

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NEVER LET ME GO

Keira, Carey and Andrew in an adaptation of a heart-shredding Booker prize winner? Expect hysterics. Total Film joins the set of down-to-earth sci-fier *Never Let Me Go* to explore a bleak world of human cloning...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

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ay 2009, Bexhill-on-Sea. The motto on this East Sussex town's coat of arms reads 'Sol Et Salubritas' - 'Sun And Health' - but it's an ironic slogan under the circumstances. This being the English seaside, it's reliably cheerless and dreary, with a chill wind gusting and storm clouds threatening on the horizon - the kind of day in which being on the seaside is enticing only if you plan on wading into the choppy water to drown yourself. In other words, the perfect day to be filming an adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's wrist-slitting novel *Never Let Me Go*, a tale of human clones bred to have their organs harvested and die tragically young. Don't let that word 'clone' fool you, though: Mark *One Hour Photo* Romanek's film is as much about sci-fi thrills as its shameless Hollywood dopplegänger *The Island* is an understated rumination on human mortality...

When Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield emerge from their trailers, they look like refugees from a Mike Leigh set, or some dreary '50s kitchen-sink drama (in fact, *Never Let Me Go*'s alternative-Britain timeline straddles the '70s, '80s and '90s). Strolling past Bexhill biddies dragging their corpulent lap dogs along the promenade, Mulligan takes up position in front of an imposing Victorian mansion block, >>

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MARK ROMANEK

drably draped in a granny's mac and sensible shoes. At least her hair's been dyed a shade of honey blonde, offering a flash of colour. Garfield follows in a shabby, jumble-sale suit and sporting a jagged buzzcut. Both wear grey wristbands – “our clone tags,” Garfield calls them – featuring the National Donor Programme insignia and a number (Holocaust hints are deliberate, Garfield's number is 4,029,495), which monitor the movements of their characters Kathy and Tommy.

Having spent most of their pathetic existences in love, but deprived of the chance to show it by Keira Knightley's maliciously jealous Ruth, who snatched Tommy for herself, they've belatedly come together and stormed to Bexhill on a wing and a prayer. Maybe they can 'defer' their ghastly destiny if they can only prove they're in love.

And so they stand outside the home of 'Madame' (Nathalie Richard), a mysterious woman who paid visits to their childhood institution Hailsham and who might just be their only hope.

“It's so weird to be playing it!” confesses Mulligan breathlessly on a tea break. “They go through phases of deluding themselves but they don't ever really question how their lives have been mapped out.”

Madame is tending her front garden when Kathy and Tommy emerge from their beat-up Mazda and tentatively approach. With flags whipping wildly in the wind and a few valiant seagulls attempting to pluck bread bombs from the air (fired by the crew so they can be winged extras in the scene), Romanek's crew manoeuvre equipment trucks into place as a breeze barrier. To their credit, the actors battle to maintain their equilibrium as they play out the uncomfortable encounter.

“This wind is ridiculous!” chuckles Garfield later. “It's so difficult to focus in, especially for Carey, whereas at least I don't have to worry about my hair. I am so happy I got clearance to cut it! I think it really works for Tommy. When the girls come to pick me up from my care centre after I haven't seen them for six years, I felt so ugly. I felt horrible because they made me look uglier than I already am. It was like, 'Aw, that's lovely...' It was such a help.”

When this sequence plays out, *Never Let Me Go's* sting is being felt. Tommy has donated, according to Garfield, “the majority of my left lung and a kidney,” leaving him a hobbling shell, a ravaged piece of human refuse barely clinging to life. This haunting, dilapidated vibe infuses the “parallel universe story about the way people are, because by and large people don't escape their existences,” says screenwriter Alex Garland, who brought Ishiguro's Booker-Prize winning novel to producer Andrew Macdonald before it was published. The braintrust behind *The Beach*, *Sunshine* and *28 Days Later* set off on the long, winding road of getting it made (at one stage Danny Boyle was even going to direct), with Garland – a good friend of the Japanese-born author – getting the unenviable task of digesting Ishiguro's stupendously elegant, elegiac prose into a viable screenplay. “I don't see this as my screenplay,” declares Garland. “There's not much invention. It's his story, characters and themes.”

Set in a quaint, tatty Britannia where breeding organ donors is as blithely accepted as, say, factory farming or animal testing are today, both film and book stay deliberately opaque about

their dystopia, presenting a hermetic environment where the donor programme is barely mentioned let alone debated. “Once you start getting into the detail too much, it opens a whole can of worms where you have to start explaining the mechanism of everything in this society,” says Romanek, seated on a bench on Bexhill's promenade and using a tennis ball as a fuzzy stress reliever. “We've made a science fiction film with no science fiction elements in it.”

Clinging to its mournful source material did throw up challenges in convincing Fox Searchlight to back *Never Let Me Go*, admits Macdonald, “because the casting had to be perfect”. Initially, they tried to reel in Knightley as Kathy, but she was preparing to play Zelda Fitzgerald in *The Beautiful And The Damned* so they instead wooed Mulligan straight off the back of *An Education* (Searchlight honcho Peter Rice sent Romanek a text from the film's inaugural Sundance screening: “Hire the genius Mulligan”).

At that point, Knightley re-entered the picture (*The Beautiful And The Damned* being, indeed, damned); she sent the message out through her agents that if Mulligan played Kathy, she'd accept the smaller role of Ruth. “Carey doing it was a huge bonus,” says the willowy actress. “Plus I really didn't like Ruth and I didn't know how to play her and I wanted to be challenged. Jealousy and fear are in everybody... Ruth's behaviour, although never acceptable and never forgivable, is completely understandable.”

Send in the clones: (above, left to right): Andrew Garfield and Carey Mulligan; director Mark Romanek with his cast; Mulligan and Keira Knightley wrap up.



NEVER LET ME GO

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Having met on Mulligan's very first job, *Pride & Prejudice*, the two actresses felt giddy to be working together again. "It was lovely for me to come into a big, scary project like this with a friend," muses Mulligan. "We can be very direct with each other." Chimes Knightley: "We didn't have to worry about treading on each other's toes. She knew any ideas I had were only to try and make it better, and vice versa." And lest we think it was all doom and gloom, both insist the opposite. "These jobs are the most fun to do," Knightley laughs. "You do these horrible scenes, then we'd have drinks and play Scrabble."

Even in their fantasies, no one could have pictured that *Never Let Me Go* would end up fielding the hottest British cast imaginable... Rocking up in his trailer on the Bexhill seafront, Garfield fiddles with his iPod dock as he rambles effusively about how "playing Tommy is so fun because he *feels* everything" and compares *Never Let Me Go*'s grim realities to Hollywood: "You get treated according to how much money you can bring in at the box office. If you're not going to rake any money in, then you get treated like a piece of shit. Obviously less fundable actors aren't getting harvested for their organs but it's close!"

We can safely assume that Garfield's own days of being treated like shit in Hollywood are over now that he'll be webslinging in Sony's *Spider-Man* reboot. During the making of *Never Let Me Go*, it was arguably the Keira-and-Carey show. Now Garfield's presence gives the film added kick. "You couldn't foresee [*Spider-Man*]," Romanek told *Total Film* in Toronto recently, "but you could foresee that Andrew was destined for very big things..." Adds Knightley with a cheeky grin: "He'll look lovely in lycra."

Several weeks later, on an altogether calmer, brighter day, *Total Film* trundles down to Chiswick Town Hall in west London. Knightley, Mulligan and Garfield have all wrapped, leaving Romanek to shoot the film's opening sequences at Hailsham, the seemingly idyllic boarding school where they spend their early years. The child actors all bear an uncanny resemblance to their starry counterparts, in particular Izzy Meikle-Small as young Kathy – she's a dead ringer for Mulligan. "We looked at thousands of children," says Romanek, "because it's a pet peeve of mine when kids don't look anything like the adults in a movie."

Inside the Victorian structure, one room has been transformed into Hailsham's soulless, antiseptic medical clinic, where the pint-sized clones get regular check-ups. Meikle-Small is being prodded and poked by a rough matron, who beckons the doctor over to examine a small bruise. He kindly tells Kathy that it's nothing to worry about...

Humanity has a propensity for blocking out even the most drastic moral wrongs. But although the story relies on the notion that these youthful replicas are subliminally hardwired from birth to accept their purpose – not just as a duty but something to be proud of – back in Bexhill, Garfield admitted that he was bothered when he first scoured the script. "I was like, 'Why don't they just fucking run away? Fucking piss off!'" he remembers. "They couldn't leave the country because they don't have passports but they could always just go and hide out in a forest somewhere..."

But Ishiguro was never interested in rebellion, or even cloning for that matter. The latter was

just a futuristic patina he layered over his bittersweet exploration of young soul non-rebels who live concertinaed lives. Accepting that some moviegoers might bristle at Tommy, Kathy and Ruth appearing so peculiarly accepting of their fate, Ishiguro counters that "if you look around the world, it's startling the extent to which people accept their little lot in life. The story has to work that way to work as a metaphor for the human condition. We can't escape mortality, and this isn't the *Spartacus* story."

Long before Romanek flicked the cameras on, intense discussions were held about adding in an escape clause, but Ishiguro – and more importantly Garland – held firm. Leading *Total Film* down a dark, dank corridor into a Chiswick town hall chamber that's being set-dressed for a scene in which the uniformed children watch Norman Wisdom movies, the screenwriter expresses "a sense of concern" about his slavish closeness to Ishiguro's novel. "I read it believing that the right way to adapt this story was to be completely faithful, but is that because I'm too in thrall of Ishiguro? Maybe to be a bit braver, to own it a bit more, would have been a better approach. I don't know..."

And so we're back where we began. Salty water, in the opinion of its creators, will be the final arbiter of *Never Let Me Go*'s success. "If people are crying at the end, then we'll have done our job," states Macdonald. Romanek, meanwhile, echoes that sentiment: "All I can hope for is that people come away moved." **TF**

***Never Let Me Go* opens on 11 February and will be reviewed in the next issue of *Total Film*. For more features and video go to totalfilm.com**