

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hamnet-Hamlet

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, November 26th, 2025

Hamnet, directed by [Chloé Zhao](#) from the 2020 novel by Irish writer [Maggie O'Farrell](#), tells the story of [Agnes](#), her marriage to [William Shakespeare](#), the birth of their three children, the tragic loss of son Hamnet at age 11 in 1596, and how his father processed his grief differently than his wife by writing the *Hamlet* play.



Jessie Buckley as Agnes © Focus Features

It was one of the producers, Steven Spielberg, who sent the offer to the Chinese born filmmaker, who in 2021 won first a Golden Globe then an Academy Award for directing *Nomadland*. Zhao was hesitant because she did not have the life experience of being a mother, but then accepted when the author of the book agreed to co-write the screenplay with her.

Nomadland's star Frances MacDormand highly recommended that her *Women Talking* co-star [Jessie Buckley](#) play Agnes. Zhao met her in 2022 at Telluride, where she also cast [Paul Mescal](#), who was at the festival to present *Aftersun*.



Paul Mescal as Will © Focus Features

Mescal, the Irish actor who emerged in 2020 with the TV series *Normal People*, from the novel by Sally Rooney, opposite Daisy Edgar-Jones, starred in *All of Us Strangers* with Adam Scott, then in *Gladiator II* (2024) by Ridley Scott, said that he was already friends with his Irish co-star from when they acted in *The Lost Daughter* (2021) directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal from the 2006 novel by Elena Ferrante, *La figlia oscura*. He had just finished shooting *The History of Sound* with Josh O'Connor, while Jessie had completed *The Bride!* directed by Gyllenhaal about the bride of Frankenstein, when they started rehearsing for *Hamnet*. Rather than practicing lines, they did physical body work, a tantric workshop and [creative dreamwork](#).



Hamnet, Susanna, Judith © Focus Features

Mescal explained that there's very little that we know about the historical William Shakespeare except his date and place of birth and death (Stratford-upon-Avon: April 23, 1564-April 23, 1616), the marriage to his wife in November 1582 when he was 18 and she was 26, the birth of their three children, Susanna and twins Judith and Hamnet. The main body of evidence are his plays, which he studied again, and *Hamlet* in particular. The father in the play, who appears as a ghost, has swapped places with Shakespeare's real life son Hamnet by being the one who died. It is only when Agnes sees the play performed at the Globe Theater in London that she understands that her husband has immortalized the death of their son in this work of art.

It was an inspired piece of casting when [Noah Jupe](#) was asked to play Hamlet, since he is the older brother of [Jacobi](#) who plays Hamnet. They claim it was their mother, actress Katy Cavanagh, who had read the novel and insisted that their sons act in the movie.

[Joe Alwyn](#), who had starred in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016) by Ang Lee, plays Bartholomew, Agnes' young brother, who is always supportive of his sister, said the British actor, "like a guardian angel or a tree planted next to her," having been raised by the same mother, a forest witch, until she died when they were children.



Buckley said that she grew up in Killarney, Southern Ireland, “surrounded by nature, mountains, lakes,” and who she is “comes from the wildness of that landscape.” About Agnes: “She is untethered, free, deeply curious, mischievous, hungry, a beautiful soul.” When Will, the Latin tutor of the village, sees Agnes recalling her falcon back to her glove, he falls in love with her. She understands that he sees her for who she really is, and returns his love. As for the last scene of the film, when Agnes smiles after comprehending what her husband has accomplished with this play, Buckley said: “the magic of that moment was to realize how mercurial and essential storytelling is.”

Chloe Zhao said: “The story touches on death, impermanence and grief and how the act of creativity and imagination could give meaning to the inevitable suffering that we go through in life.” Her film is meant to remind us that as human beings we are part of nature, not separate from it, and within that oneness, which is the divine, there’s no fear of death, which is equally part of humanity as birth. When Agnes gives birth to her daughter inside a tree in the woods, with majestic trees surrounding her as guardians, we realize that the female body is capable of the same “pulsating energy as volcanoes or the tide,” but our society has forgotten about the powerful wisdom of women.



For another take on the relationship between Anne (Agnes) Hathaway and William Shakespeare, you could go back and watch *All Is True* (2018), where director Kenneth Branagh plays the Bard when he goes back to live in Stratford-on-Avon from London at age 49 and rejoins his wife (Judy Dench) and two daughters. That film has a different take on the death of Hamnet, since there was no plague outbreak in 1596.

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