

The Almond and the Seahorse

Written by [Bethany Handley](#)

Kaite O'Reilly, writer and dramaturg, is one of the extraordinary voices challenging what it means to tell a Welsh story. Kaite's first feature film, *The Almond and the Seahorse*, takes a story rooted in Wales and disability politics, and speaks to the world. Speaking to me from her home in rural West Wales, Kaite discusses the importance of representation on the big screen and the diversifying of Welsh film.

The Almond and the Seahorse, directed by Celyn Jones and Tom Stern, follows two couples, Sarah and Joe, and Toni and Gwen, where one partner is living with amnesia as a result of traumatic brain injury. With empathy and unconditional love, the film examines what it's like to love someone who may not always remember you. The film, premiered at Zurich Film Festival in 2022, consists of a formidable cast including Rebel Wilson, Charlotte Gainsborough, Trine Dyrholm, Meera Syal and Ruth Madeley.

The screenplay is adapted from her play of the same name, originally launched at the Sherman in Cardiff in 2008. "*We had a fantastic response from the audience,*" said Kaite, "*it's a story that really speaks to people because it's making visible the silent epidemic.*" As leading British neurologist Oliver Sacks said, traumatic brain injury is a "silent epidemic and it's not going anywhere." Kaite placed this line directly into both the play and screenplay, ensuring the impacts of amnesia are "not silent anymore."

Unsurprisingly, the play was a huge success. As Kaite points out, traumatic brain injury touches every family, and the story of love and resilient relationships speaks to everyone. Following a five-star Guardian review and productions all over the world, Kaite decided it was time to expand the story's audience.

The role of Joe in the play had originally been written for Celyn Jones, who Kaite had been working with since he was a teenager. They'd been discussing adapting the play into a screenplay for years. Over lunch in 2018, they decided to give the screenplay a shot and wrote the first draft of the screenplay that very weekend. "*It just snowballed,*" said Kaite, "*Mad as Birds saw the potential and loved it.*" Due to Kaite and Celyn's "*absolute belief and trust in each other*", they'd develop the screenplay remotely with intensive 24 hour meet ups where they worked through the night.

As an integral member of disability arts in Wales and beyond, Kaite's writing is grounded in disability politics. She rips apart the dichotomy that disabled characters must either be inspirational or objects of pity. In *The Almond and the Seahorse*, Kaite challenges current

dehumanising and frightening depictions of traumatic brain injury survivors in film. *“I wanted to challenge who the victim was,”* she grins. Survivors of traumatic brain injury are “not victims. They’re survivors and they’re dealing with shifted reality.” Instead of being ‘victims’, Kaite’s characters are *“living (their) lives with autonomy and complexity, and challenges and triumphs, just like anyone else.”*

As always, Kaite is inspiring ‘best practice’ in the arts; Kaite’s characters are born of research and lived experience. Even the character of the neuropsychologist, Dr Falmer, played by Meera Syal, draws on her own experience of someone close to her experiencing traumatic brain injury to support her patients. Kaite herself, like many people, has friends and family who have lived experience of traumatic brain injury, including her father.

Throughout writing both the play and screenplay, Kaite consulted Welsh and Wales based disabled people and people with lived experience of traumatic brain injury to ensure she was doing their stories justice. Her advisors would sit with Kaite, screening the film on her laptop whilst they chatted about representation.

Headway, a Welsh charity who help people and families whose lives have been affected by brain injury, were also involved from the very first stage of research when Kaite was originally writing the play. Unusually lived experience didn’t just shape the script; Headway worked with production company Mad as Birds during production to ensure the film remained grounded in people’s lived experience. Even posters in the field hospital in the film host the artwork of people using Headway’s services. Imagine a film industry where involving the people whose stories we’re telling is common practice, not ‘best practice’.

This involvement of the people whose stories we tell is one way this film increases representation. Another example is the extraordinary female leads, who include Rebel Wilson, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Trine Dyrholm, Meera Syal and Ruth Madeley. This fabulous cast, or the ‘embarrassment of riches’ as Kaite affectionately calls them, are a rarely seen force of power and diversity. As Kaite points out, they’re refreshingly all over the age of 35 and represent talent from around the world; we rarely see such powerful women together.

As a wheelchair user myself, I found the character of Jenny, played by the incredible Ruth Madeley, particularly refreshing. Often the impairments of disabled characters drive the narrative, yet Jenny is a stropky professional who just happens to be disabled. Kaite dismantles the stereotype of the virtuous, appeasing disabled woman with a character who’s flawed, loving and just happens to use a wheelchair. This character shouldn’t be radical. As Kaite said, we need films where *“human relationships have all the different shades of what it is to be human.”*

I asked Kaite why it was so important to have disabled people represented on the big screen. She grinned. *“It’s how we change things,”* she said. *“We’ve got to normalise a film that is full of women who are mature women and they’re the protagonists of their own lives,*

whether they be disabled or non-disabled. We have to have more representation of people's cultural heritage." Without this diverse representation we see the erasure of people's stories and realities, and the forced silencing of communities.

So why do films like this need to be screened in cinemas? It's a film that challenges us, that evokes recognition and a complex array of emotions so demands to be discussed. When the difficult topic matter touches so many of us, watching the film should be a shared experience. *"There's something incredibly impactful about being with friends or strangers in a space, all our hearts beating together,"* said Kaite, *"Your heart will be wrung out. But you will feel seen."*

Kaite has devoted her career so far to this cause, helping people to feel seen and to recognise their stories: *"I've been wanting to be inclusive, I've been wanting to make visible those of us who have been left in the shadow for too long."*

Thanks to change makers like Kaite, we are seeing slow progress in the film industry, which includes more diverse representations and more stories from Wales or, like *The Almond and the Seahorse*, stories that originate in Wales.

Kaite has lived in West Wales since the early 90s, having moved from England due to discrimination against the Irish at the time. Since then, Kaite has been an integral voice in Welsh arts, helping to challenge our definitions of a Welsh story and promote Wales to the world. *"I'm really grateful to Wales because it's given me a home,"* said Kaite. *"The idea of my voice, being part of that of the multiple international Welsh voices that are emanating out into the world is incredibly exciting."*

With a director from North Wales, research from Wales, a script written in Wales, and filming in Wales, *The Almond and the Seahorse's* DNA is Welsh yet tells a universal story. Kaite claims writing the script at her home at the end of a dirt track in rural West Wales for a film shown around the world is proof that it's a myth you need to live in Cardiff or London to contribute to the creative industries. This ability to tell a story from anywhere in Wales to global audiences is diversifying Welsh identity and our arts sector.

The Almond and the Seahorse marks an exciting time for the Welsh film industry and the wider arts sector as we begin to celebrate the diversities of Welsh identity. Strong, international voices such as Kaite's are helping to shape a more inclusive and innovative Wales. As Kaite said, *"we are a small nation, but we talk to the world. And the world is represented in our borders."*

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