

THE LOVE AFFAIR between film-makers and key figures of literary history has been so passionate and all-embracing – one thinks of *Shakespeare in Love*, *Sylvia* (Plath), *Becoming Jane* (Austen), *Iris* (Murdoch), *The Hours* (Virginia Woolf), *Finding Neverland* (JM Barrie) and a brace of impersonations of Truman Capote – it's amazing that nobody, until now, has tried to nail Dylan Thomas on celluloid.

He seems ideal for movie treatment. His poetry may often have been obscure, and his most famous work, *Under Milk Wood*, was a radio 'play for voices' that couldn't translate to visual drama, but his short life positively yelped and cavorted with incident. Curly-haired, goggle-eyed, sexually voracious, bohemian, logorrhoeic and chronically sloshed, he played to the hilt the role of self-destructive Celtic bard, flamboyantly untameable and irresistible to women.

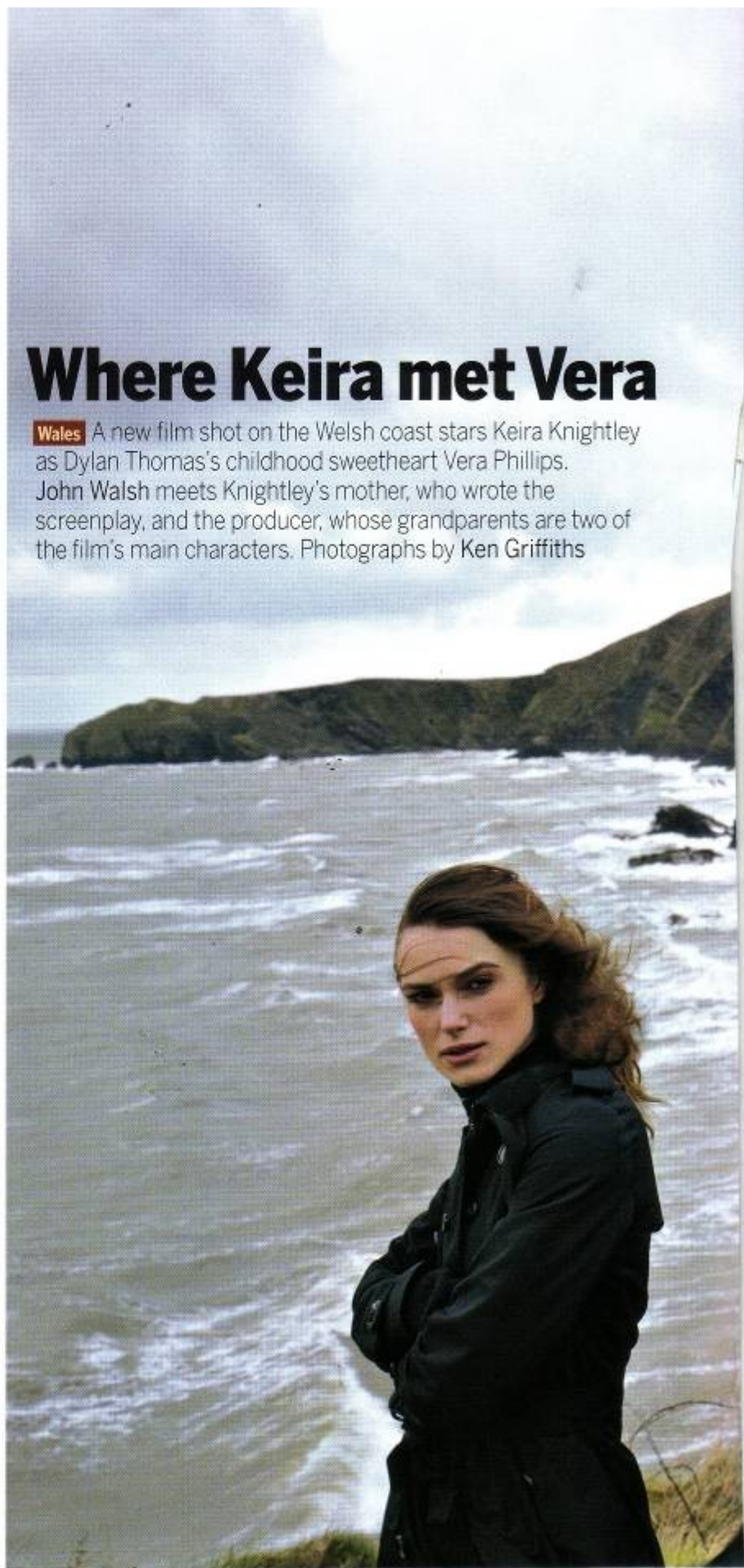
At home in Swansea, Dylan was 'the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive'. In London pubs during the war, when he worked on propaganda films for the BBC, he was a loose firework of impromptu wit and crazed misbehaviour. For US fans at his lecture tours in the early 1950s, he was the dazzling Welsh avatar of Walt Whitman, until he downed 18 straight vodkas one night in 1953 and joined the great eisteddfod in the sky.

Now he's the subject of *The Edge of Love*, directed by John Maybury (who coaxed Derek Jacobi into a stunning rendition of the artist Francis Bacon in *Love is the Devil*), to be released in June. It is not a biopic about the cherubic Lothario but a densely textured mood movie about female friendship and fractured romance. It tells the story of four people: Dylan Thomas, his wild-haired, London-Irish wife Caitlin and their friends Vera Phillips – a childhood sweetheart of Dylan's – and her English army husband, William Killick.

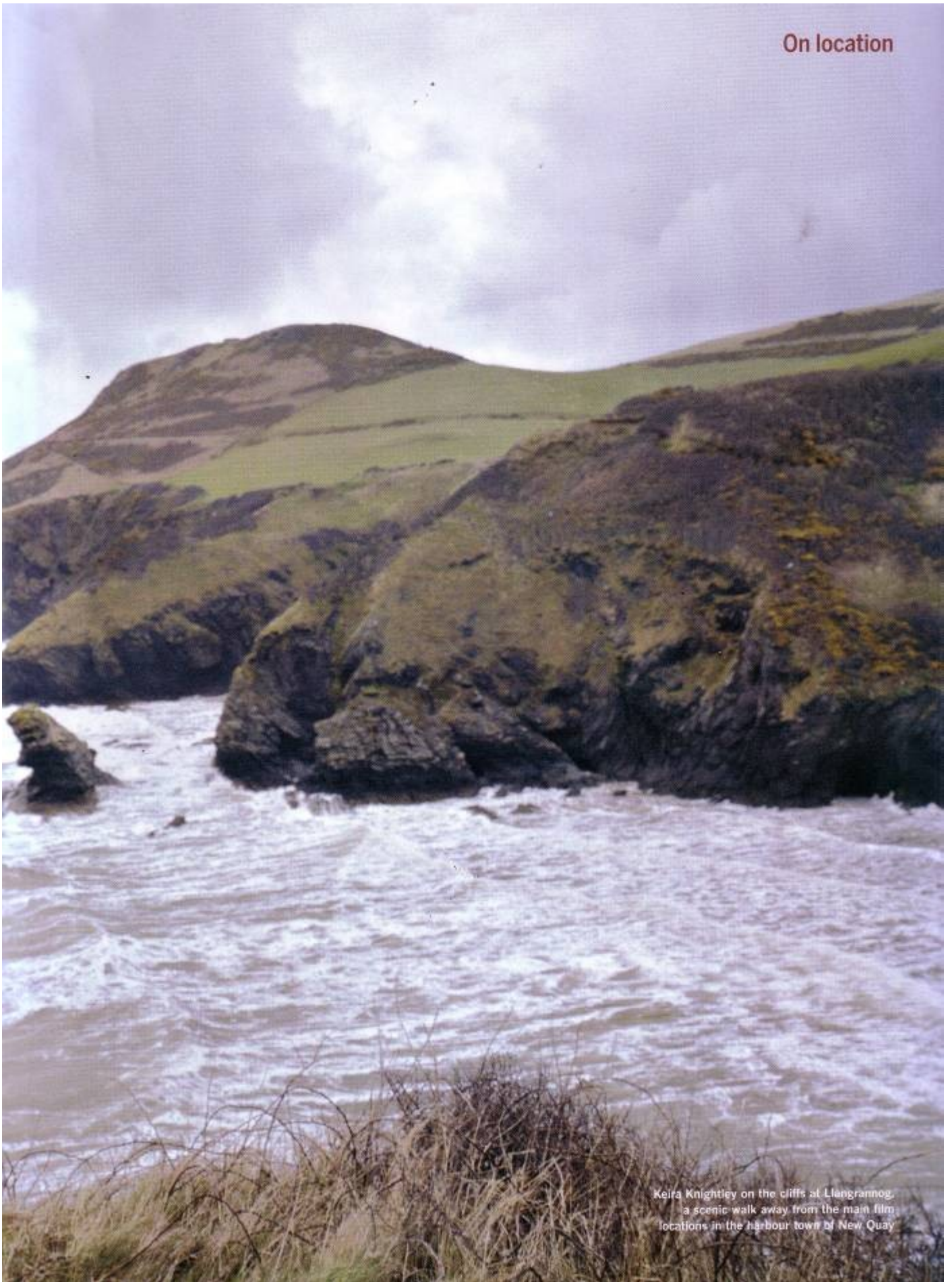
Critical (and tabloid) attention will focus on the casting of Keira Knightley as Vera, and Sienna Miller as Caitlin, not to mention the blearily seductive Matthew Rhys as Dylan, and Cillian Murphy as the stiffly British officer, Killick. Fans of the divine Ms Knightley will marvel at how well she suits the Forties look (the marcelled hair! the crimson lipstick!) and the fact that she can sing – a revelation along the lines of discovering, in 1930, that Garbo could talk. But viewers will also luxuriate in the Welsh landscape evoked by the film's ➤

Where Keira met Vera

Wales A new film shot on the Welsh coast stars Keira Knightley as Dylan Thomas's childhood sweetheart Vera Phillips. John Walsh meets Knightley's mother, who wrote the screenplay, and the producer, whose grandparents are two of the film's main characters. Photographs by Ken Griffiths



On location



Keira Knightley on the cliffs at Llangrannog, a scenic walk away from the main film locations in the harbour town of New Quay

On location



Knightsley, who stars in *The Edge of Love*, and her mother Sharman Macdonald, who wrote the screenplay, at The Nag's Head Inn, Abercych, Pembrokeshire

► Canadian-born cinematographer, Jonathan Freeman.

On the windswept cliff-top where the Thomases and the Killicks lived in adjacent bungalows in the 1940s, on the beach and in the surrounding fields of New Quay, Cardiganshire, the Strindbergian drama is played out: Caitlin and Vera become devoted soul-sisters, Dylan's long-festering love for Vera provokes scandal among the locals and jealousy in Vera's husband, Dylan and Vera seem

'I find her very inspiring,' says Sharman Macdonald of her movie-star daughter, 'so she's in my head when I write'

to rekindle their childhood passion, babies are born, Caitlin sleeps around, William goes off to war and returns a damaged, blank-faced stranger, who explodes one night when he takes a machine gun and a hand grenade to the poet's rickety shack

and is arraigned for attempted murder at Lampeter Crown Court.

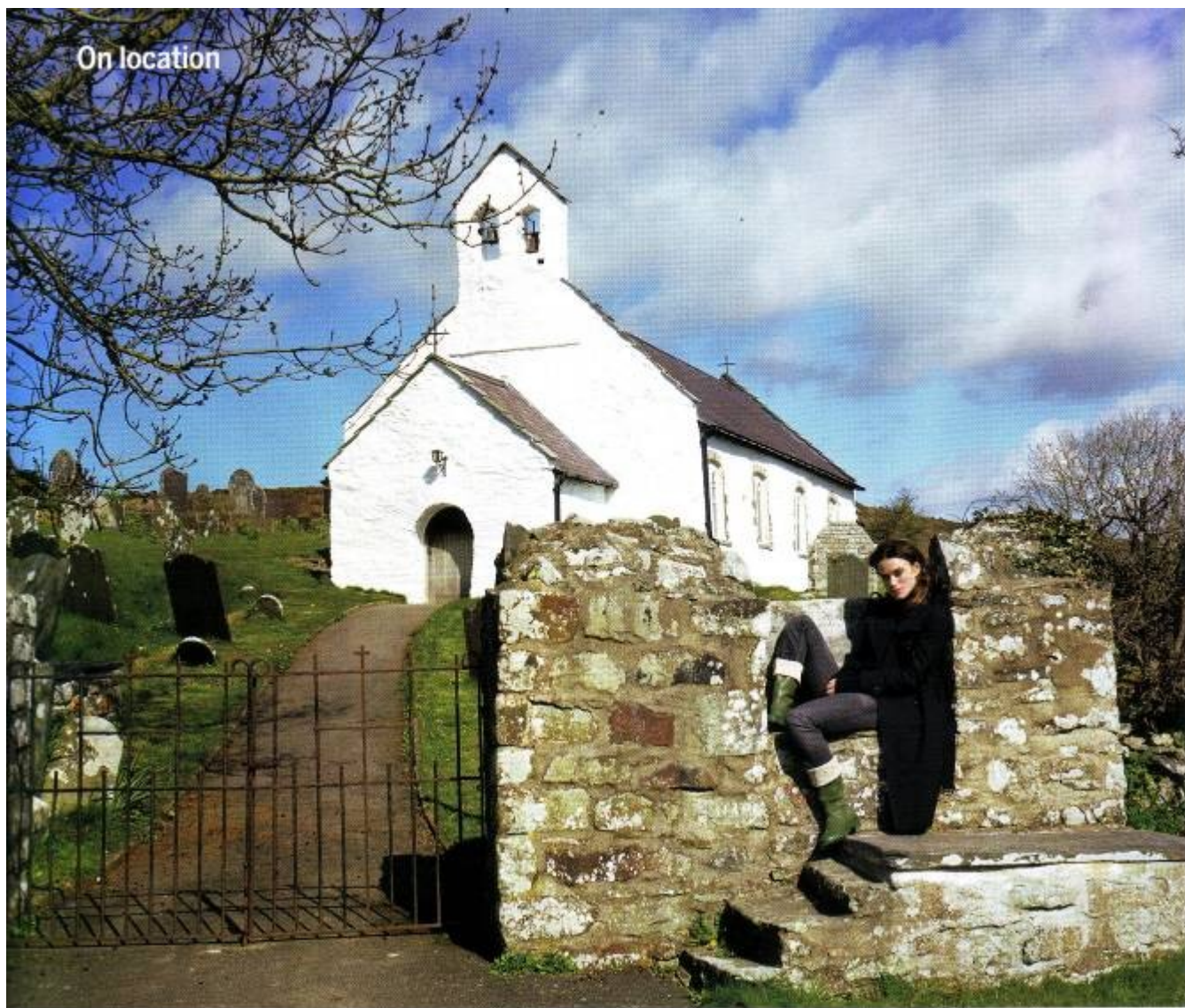
The extraordinary story of the *ménage à quatre* is close to producer Rebekah Gilbertson's heart, because Vera and William were her grandparents. 'I was close to them both,' she says. 'We spent every Christmas and summer with them, in Long Melford, Suffolk. Vera was very creative: she made us put on plays, had tons of dressing-up clothes and knocked up a very mad

soup. She was a perfect granny. William, my grandfather, was like an oak tree. We were devoted to him. When I lived with them for a year, while my brother was in hospital, it was William who put out my egg and soldiers in the morning,

took me to school and picked me up at the end of the day.'

She knew from a very early age about their connection with Dylan Thomas, 'but it was something you didn't really talk about. It was always like a family secret that should remain untold.' That's quite a family secret, isn't it, that your granny once shagged Dylan Thomas? 'No, no,' says Gilbertson severely, 'we had, and still have, no idea if she did or not.' The ambiguity of their relationship (which remains just-about-ambiguous in the screenplay) is what gives the film its tension and glow, in the seductive meeting of eyes and the square dance of fidelity and betrayal conducted by the four characters.

GILBERTSON, 34, A ONE-TIME scenic painter at the Royal Opera House, is luminously enthusiastic about her movie after seven years of patient gestation. She met ►



Revisiting Cardiganshire, where much of the film was shot, Keira Knightley is pictured outside St Michael's church, on the road from Penbryn to Tresaith

► Sharman Macdonald, the playwright, while still at film school. Macdonald became script consultant on her early short films, and Macdonald's daughter, the teenage Keira Knightley, was given a small part. At a drinks party, Gilbertson told Macdonald the story of Thomas and her grandparents, and the playwright offered to write up the story as a screenplay – but, says Gilbertson, 'she gave me the task of telling the family what I planned to do. Luckily they all backed me, so I told her to go ahead and write it.'

'I was given total freedom to make things up,' says Macdonald, 57, a Scot with a mane of grey hair and a voice like a 10-year-old angel. 'Rebekah's mother read the treatment and was immensely positive about it. None of them ever said, "Oh no, you can't say that." She also showed the script to Aeronwy Thomas, the daughter of Dylan and Caitlin, who turns

up in the film as a baby.' She said that what I'd caught was the fact that they'd had fun. She said that when people write about her parents, that's the bit they miss out.'

Macdonald's father is Welsh and no fan of the national bard. 'He couldn't stand Dylan. He used to call him a professional

During filming in New Quay, Knightley and Sienna Miller stayed at a house in the middle of the country, away from prying eyes

Welshman. I came upon him myself when I was a student and did *Under Milk Wood* at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and adored it. His rhythms were sensational, and I loved it with a huge passion.' She never, however, thought of *The Edge of Love* as a film about Dylan Thomas. 'I conceived of it as a film about friendship between four people, and how friendship disappears,' she says. 'This happens to all of us, particularly in the acting business:

you make very close friendships that you think will last for ever, and at the end of the job they go. People who are your heart's blood for a while – suddenly they're not there. But in this particular friendship there was a reason why it had to end, and I wanted to explore that. And

to say something about men coming back from a war and the effect it's had on them, whether they've come home from Korea or Vietnam or Iraq.'

FROM THE START, the two women decided it was important to use the original locations where the Thomases and Killicks acted out their intense private drama in 1944. 'We found the harbour and the little blue and pink cottages that existed 60 years ago ►

On location

► mostly unchanged, bar a few satellite dishes,' says Gilbertson. 'But the twin bungalows in which they lived – called Majoda and Fynnonfeddyg – had been modernised. Our production designer, Alan Macdonald, went along the whole Welsh coast looking for two cottages together – but we ended up back at New Quay. It just felt right, filming in the places where they'd walked, and in the Black Lion where they drank, and we ended up building replicas of the two bungalows in the field on the cliff-top, next door to the original structures.'

John Maybury filmed outside the original bank (now a holiday home) where Thomas gradually leached all the money from Killick's account while he was away, under fire, in Greece. He used the stone steps down which Dylan walked, or staggered, on the way home to Majoda (the steps become a kind of visual motif in the movie) and the country lanes near Nanternis. He even used the original Lampeter Assizes building for the trial scenes.

'It was very useful,' says Gilbertson, 'being related to Vera, because it made it easier to talk to local people, who were very friendly and opened a lot of doors for us.' How did they remember Dylan Thomas? 'They had mixed feelings. He was, notoriously, always on the cage. And when it came to the trial, a lot of people supported William against Dylan, because he was a war hero. It upset Dylan. He was Welsh, yet his countrymen were siding with this Englishman.'

The shoot in New Quay lasted three weeks. The crew stayed in local cottages, the actresses occupied a house in the country, away from prying eyes, and Matthew Rhys threw a party in the Black

'The script calls for a lot of rain,' says the film's producer Rebekah Gilbertson, 'and fortunately there was plenty of it.'

Lion where Cillian Murphy acted as DJ. The weather was frightful. 'It was May 2007,' says Gilbertson, 'but it felt like April. Sharman's script calls for a lot of rain, and fortunately there was plenty of it. We didn't get many hot days. Keira and

Sienna were so brave, running into the sea when it was absolutely freezing.'

They ate in 'some great seafood restaurants' and took long walks on the gorgeous coastline from New Quay to Llangrannog. The local harbour master,

The local harbour master, hearing of their plans to recreate New Quay as it was in 1944, moved all the modern boats out of shot

hearing of their plans to recreate New Quay as it was in 1944, moved all the modern sailing boats out of shot, so they could have a clear view of the beach.

Sharman Macdonald was impressed by the Georgian and Edwardian painted

for Caitlin Thomas,' she says, 'because she has Caitlin's spirit. I find her very inspiring, so she's in my head when I write things. Then she read it and said, "I want to do this. I want to help get it made." I said, "Yes, and you're playing Caitlin" and she

said, "No, I like Vera." Macdonald hit the roof, but her daughter prevailed. So, to assert her creative authority, Macdonald set out to change Vera's character in the script. 'Vera had been a very quiet, sensitive sort until that point, so I wanted

to make more of her, fulfil her more. She wasn't even a singer until Keira decided she wanted to play her.' So Keira Knightley, who had never sung in public before, found herself in a mock-up of the wartime London Underground, singing live in front of 300 people, just because her mother had had another whim. The lesson here is clear: do not cross Sharman Macdonald when she wants to put you in her movie script.

And when it was over, what impression of Dylan Thomas did Rebekah Gilbertson take away? Was he a selfish, drunken baby, a charming, passionate bard, or something in between? Discreetly, she leaves the final judgement to her grandmother. 'I think Vera realised at the

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houses of Aberaeron. She remembers visiting the town with Keira when her daughter was small; they stayed there on a whim, and mother and daughter had a vast Welsh breakfast the next morning. Her memories of the film shoot have

become entwined with earlier memories. She wrote the script in the Caribbean, where she was keeping an eye on her daughter, playing the feisty Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. 'When I was writing it, I always had Keira in mind

end that Dylan was never going to get out of his playpen. He liked his hot milk with broken bread in it. He liked his crochet rug. He was what he was. He had this gift for words, he was great fun, he seduced you in several ways, but he was never going to be anyone but Dylan. He could be a complete nightmare. So she made the decision to go for something more meaningful in her life.' Leaving behind the twin bungalows overlooking the sea, the warm fuf of the Black Lion and the arena of tormented emotions that this deeply enjoyable movie so winningly evokes. **T**

'The Edge of Love' is released on 20 June