

TAKE THIS WALTZ

Is emotional infidelity as hurtful as physical infidelity? “Take This Waltz,” Sarah Polley’s striking sophomore film, explores this and many other themes concerning the marriage of a young, Torontonion hipster couple and the provocative rickshaw driver who comes between them. Michelle Williams builds the case that she’s one of the greatest actresses of our time, with a remarkably nuanced performance as the dissatisfied wife. Seth Rogen nails his turn as the oblivious would-be cuckold. Though there are a handful of missteps dispersed throughout, and marital strife in film is generally well-worn territory, Polley’s intimate and complex story often feels like a cinematic revelation.

Freelance writer Margot (Michelle Williams) meets Daniel (Luke Kirby) on a return flight from a business trip and they are immediately drawn to one another. Though Margot is off the market, she allows herself to flirt with this attractive stranger all the way home. After all, she expects that she’ll never see him again. But when Margot learns that Daniel is her neighbor, she is forced to explore why it is that she is so taken by this man who is not her husband. Daniel likewise finds himself smitten and, as such, refuses to disappear from her periphery. Little by little, she lets him in until she is fo-

cused on him completely and her husband, Lou (Seth Rogen), replaces Daniel on the sidelines.

Though Margot is the one who considers straying, it is not a black and white case of betrayal. Polley's script efficiently outlines what's been eating Margot and Lou's relationship via a series of failed seduction attempts by Margot. The more tempted she is by Daniel, the harder she tries to re-connect with Lou to give her a reason to stop the madness. But Lou is absorbed in his work writing an all-chicken cookbook. "I'm making chicken," he explains, during one of his many brush-offs. "You're always making chicken!" she explodes. She is pleading for him to give her a reason to stay, but she cannot divert his attention from the stove. Lou doesn't understand how dire the situation is and he chalks it up to momentary insanity on her part. When he attempts intimacy with her, it takes the form of baby talk and the bandying of mutilation fantasies. Margot plays along, but becomes increasingly frustrated as it fails to lead anywhere physical. Though this may have been enough for both of them at one time, Margot now desires a more mature sexual relationship than the one Lou is (or isn't) providing.

We think we know where our moral limits lie, but sometimes those boundaries are tested. Margot is clearly depressed and, yes, a little immature, but she isn't a bad per-

son. She is very emotionally attached to Lou and never imagined that she could be lured away from him. But when physical needs aren't being met, it's not hard for the emotional connection to fray as well. She's afraid of hurting him but he unknowingly continues to make her miserable on a daily basis. Margot convinces herself that so long as she's not actually touching Daniel, she is remaining faithful. As their attraction deepens, she fantasizes about a time when she has "earned" the right to give in to temptation. She requests a date to kiss Daniel... after she has remained loyal to Lou for 30 years. It's not until Daniel responds with a vividly sexual monologue about what he would "do" to her, and ends it with a declaration of love, that she starts to realize that what she's doing might not be quite so innocuous after all.

Though she's not all that unusual in the real world, in cinema, Margot is a singular character. She's lonely and discontented but she has been able to ignore these things up until now thanks to complacency in her marriage and the lack of a social support group. Her only friend besides Lou is her sister-in-law, Gertrude (Sarah Silverman). She can't very well discuss her affair with someone who will certainly side with Lou. To make that friendship even more strained, Gertrude is attempting to overcome her addiction to alcohol, one angry step at a time. Though she offers a few nuggets of ab-

stract wisdom, Gertrude cannot be anyone's shoulder to cry on. With no one to talk her out of her escalating flirtation with Daniel, Margot instead continues to talk herself into it.

For my money, Michelle Williams is the most fascinating actress working today. She knows how to convey a million emotions in one frown. She's movie star cute, but she's also capable of conveying a very relatable chasm of despair. In the scant moments when Polley's script stumbles, Williams uses her delivery to deftly smooth it over. In their first conversation, Margot confesses to Daniel that she is "afraid of connections." Before you have time to groan, she explains that she's referring to airport layovers. She becomes overwhelmed with the stress of it all, "wondering if I'll miss it. I don't like being in between things," she says. "I'm afraid of being afraid." In the hands of another actress, these lines, which smack of character Cliff's Notes, would sound painfully forced. But Williams imbues them with depth. Later, in Daniel's apartment, her body language tells us what the dialogue does not. There is no question as to why Daniel can't get her out of his head. She doesn't know what she needs but he wants to be the one to give it to her when she figures it out.

While this is most certainly the Michelle Williams show, the supporting cast holds its own. Delightfully, Seth Rogen re-

turns to his “Freaks and Geeks” roots, choosing a dramatic performance with comedic undertones over the comedic performance with dramatic undertones that made him a household name. Sarah Silverman delivers a refreshing take on the struggling alcoholic character. Instead of wallowing in her affliction, she rages. She’s pissed off about her lot and she’s not afraid to be brutally honest about it. Luke Kirby occasionally comes off as cheesy and, as such, makes Daniel seem slightly untrustworthy. It might have been more effective to believe the attraction with someone a little more Ryan Gosling and a little less Matt LeBlanc. For the most part, however, the audience can’t help but see Daniel through Margot’s eyes, and in those moments that he’s making her swoon, her reaction feels completely justified.

Polley compliments her elegant script with her remarkable eye for detail. She peppers her scenes with minutiae that lend a borderline subliminal authenticity to her characters. In most movies, it seems like the characters have a different outfit for every day and they are flawlessly put together as if they have a personal stylist doing their hair and makeup every morning. Though they are relatively fashionable people, Margot, Lou and Daniel repeat clothes. The straps on Margot’s tank top are often twisted. We see sweat beading on their foreheads and backs and it looks, well, sweaty.

Here, nudity isn't used to titillate but to show familiarity between characters. As much as "Take This Waltz" is a morbid fairy tale, it is very much set in the real world.

Shot in the middle of a hazy, sweltering Toronto summer, Luc Montpellier's cinematography at times exudes a feverish quality. He frequently uses tracking shots lending many scenes a poetic fluidity. His camera isn't afraid to get right up into the faces of the characters. After all, their faces are where the action is. By the film's conclusion, the audience feels as intimately acquainted with the characters as they are to each other.

Polley's tremendous talent shines brightly in her second feature. She is clearly capable of great work. I've always enjoyed her performances on screen, but it is behind the camera that she truly flourishes.

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