

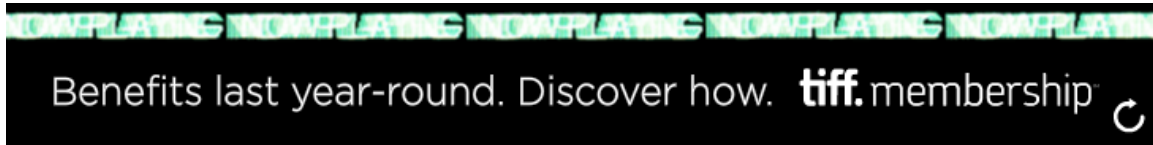
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MOVIE REVIEW

Sometimes Attraction Becomes a Slow Dance Around the Subject

'Take This Waltz,' Directed by Sarah Polley

NYT Critics' Pick



Anatomy of a Scene: 'Take This Waltz': Sarah Polley, the writer and director of "Take This Waltz," narrates a scene from the film.

By A. O. SCOTT

Published: June 28, 2012

Margot (Michelle Williams) and Daniel (Luke Kirby) meet on a trip to Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, site of an 18th-century French fort and a present-day National Historic Park. They sit together on the flight home to Toronto, and the attraction between them is obvious and mutual. This makes it a bit awkward when they discover, sharing a cab from the airport, that Daniel lives across the street from the charming, cozy row house where Margot lives with her husband, Lou (Seth Rogen).

More About This Movie

Overview

New York Times Review

Margot is not eager to give up her infatuation with her broodily handsome neighbor. Nor does she want to destroy her marriage, which in

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Magnolia Pictures

Luke Kirby and Michelle Williams in "Take This Waltz," a film written and directed by Sarah Polley and set in Toronto.

Margot and Daniel don't know what they are going to do, and Lou does not know what is happening, and for most of the movie we dwell in a similar state of suspense and partial knowledge.

We also find ourselves in a richly imagined, highly specific place. Toronto, which has obligingly impersonated just about every other North American city for decades, is here given the chance to play itself, to show off its special blend of dowdiness and sophistication. Speaking of the glories of Canada, "Take This Waltz" is also a tribute to the genius of Leonard Cohen. The title is taken from [one of his songs](#), which accompanies an astonishing (and very sexy) montage late in the film. We also hear, at another crucial point in the drama, [the Nova Scotia-born singer Feist's](#) ebullient, uncompromising cover of "Closing Time."

But not "Hallelujah," which Mr. Cohen himself has said is [overused in films and on television](#). The lyrics to that song nevertheless contain a line that resonates through Ms. Polley's movie: "All I ever learned from love was how to shoot somebody who outdrew you." In other words, how to turn vulnerability into advantage. How to cheat. The wounding power of love, its essential asymmetry and unfairness, permeates "Take This Waltz." The one thing you know for sure is that someone — maybe everyone — is going to get hurt.

And yet the film is neither depressing nor melodramatic. It is full of music, color and warmth, some of it supplied by a supporting cast that most notably includes [Sarah Silverman](#) as Lou's wise and troubled sister Geraldine. The story takes its time unfolding and pauses to linger over funny, odd and touching details. The camera (Luc Montpellier is the director of photography) is as sensitive as Margot herself to nuances of feeling and perception.

Ms. Polley's debut feature, "[Away From Her](#)," was based on an Alice Munro short story, and Margot, with her mix of good sense and capriciousness, resembles some of Ms. Munro's heroines. In a Munro story the men might not be as nice, but the balance of

spite of moments of frictions and miscommunication, is playful and affectionate. (Mr. Rogen turns his natural clowning charm into an aspect of Lou's personality that is, for Margot, both comforting and annoying.) Daniel, for his part, does not push himself on Margot but does not exactly push her away either. He hovers in the middle distance, letting her know that he is interested and available should her ambivalence resolve in his favor.

That ambivalence is the principal subject and dominant mood of "Take This Waltz," [Sarah Polley's](#) honest, sure-footed, emotionally generous second feature. Ms. Williams, one of the bravest and smartest actresses working in movies today, portrays a young woman who is indecisive and confused, but never passive. Margot's uncertainty, as she and Ms. Polley understand it, is a kind of passion in its own right. The current of her desire runs strongly in two directions: toward the man she knows and loves, and toward the stranger she wants in ways beyond her immediate understanding.

Margot is stubborn, decent and disciplined, but also selfish, needy and coy. Nobody in this film is just one way. Ms. Polley, as a writer, a director of actors and a constructor of images, excels at managing the idiosyncrasies and contradictions of her characters so that our knowledge of them is both intimate and mined with potential surprise.



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clarity and compassion in “Take This Waltz” suggests that this writer continues to exert an influence over Ms. Polley.

As a filmmaker she is good at subtlety, and also at obviousness. There is a striking scene in a swimming pool shower room where Geraldine, Margot and another friend chat idly about sex, marriage and other matters. A group of older women is in another part of the room, and Ms. Polley cuts from one set of naked bodies to the other, noting the contrasts of size, shape and firmness. It’s hard to miss the point — young flesh will age; old flesh was once young; time wins in the end — but it’s a point worth making.

The last section of the film may seem a bit fuzzier. There is a moment about 90 minutes in that I was sure was the end, and I still think that stopping there would have made “Take This Waltz” perfect. But I’m also willing to grant that perfection may not have been Ms. Polley’s chief concern, especially since the great theme of this wonderful movie — a source of delight as well as distress — is that imperfection is all anyone ever learns from love.

*“Take This Waltz” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). Sex, implicit and explicit.*

## Take This Waltz

*Opens on Friday in Manhattan.*

Written and directed by Sarah Polley; director of photography, Luc Montpeller; edited by Christopher Donaldson; music by Jonathan Goldsmith; production design by Matthew Davies; costumes by Lea Carlson; produced by Susan Cavan and Ms. Polley; released by Magnolia Pictures. Running time: 1 hour 56 minutes.

WITH: Michelle Williams (Margot), Seth Rogen (Lou), Luke Kirby (Daniel), Sarah Silverman (Geraldine), Jennifer Podemski (Karen) and Diane D’Aquila (Harriet).

A version of this review appeared in print on June 29, 2012, on page C6 of the New York edition with the headline: Sometimes Attraction Becomes a Slow Dance Around the Subject.

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October 6th, 2012 5:50 pm



### 9. first time review

I've been following comments on the movies I watch on on here for years, but this is my first contribution. Somehow this film bothered and intrigued me enough to actually register, and start commenting. Interesting firstly to observe commenters react to the reviewer, but not often to each other. All contributions are of value in this space, and worthy of reflection. With regards to the film, what I see here is an intricate postmodern deconstruction of the ultimate meta-narrative: love. Children of babyboomers, Gen X is doomed to bear the burden of shattered, liminal, in-between identities- but without the intrinsic virtual 'life' of subsequent networked generations. Gen X still cares about reality, because we were there before the internet, witnessed the birth of hip hop and MTV- we bridged the cultural revolution. In the film we are watching Margot- but how long does it take to actually know her name? And the cheesy cipher of a guy she falls for across the street? Does he even have a name in the film, or only in the credits? I hated that guy in the movie- what a smug, shallow, nothing of a man, who calls himself a 'painter', not an artist because he's afraid to show his work. But Margot is essentially a wounded child, an 'innocent' manipulator who constructs her own complexities to disguise her pathology: she has no identity, and therefore cannot love- but how many times does she say "I wuv you"? What emerges is that blood is thicker than water- kinship trumps the myth of romantic love, and at least these generations have not yet virtualised that. The cultural complex of 'everything, faster, more' is running it's course, because the pursuit of 'happiness' only leads to deeper dissatisfaction. Despite the virtualisation of experience in recent years, we have thankfully gained philosophical and empirical windows out of the postmodern affliction which obliterated the possibility of 'true love': i.e., all experience is networked and relational.

– *daro, nsw, australia*

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

August 17th, 2012 4:25 pm

Rating

### 8. Over-praised

Tiresome, sometimes excruciating, and retro-furnished to the point of gagging. This is not a great film.

Pretentious dialogue and staging. Sarah Silverman was the bright point of the film.

– *SJ, London*

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 3 Readers

August 9th, 2012 2:59 pm

Rating

### 7. Catching up with Generation X

I'm in my late 30s, and as I held my breath and absorbed every frame of this poignant, funny, insightful and kind of tragic film, I kept thinking of "Reality Bites," which came out in the 1990s and "defined" my generation (GenX). We were young and without children and pretty much not married back then. For some reason, "Take this Waltz" seems to have caught up with us as we now bushwhack our way through the thickets of steady relationships and life with, without, or wanting children. The film's humor is very much GenX - laid back, ironic, subtle - and really "gets" the fashion and design sensibilities of a certain subset of my peers (a white, middle-class subset, I guess). I hope the director knows how much the film captures certain people of my generation, and I wonder what the next defining film for our little pack will be.

– *Carrie, Vermont*

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

August 6th, 2012 5:50 pm

Rating 

#### **6. Isolde Jones**

Alas, we are in a "down" period when jaded reviewers and filmgoers are too apt to gloss an extraordinary film over. In this one, I find an enchanting contemporary resetting of Tristan and Isolde. There is deft design and photography, harking back to Expressionist film. This film is crafted like an exquisite piece of embroidery. Even the various shoes worn by Ms. Williams advance the story. He who has eyes, let him see!

– *edmcohen, Newark, DE*

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 1 Readers

August 3rd, 2012 12:20 pm

Rating 

#### **5. What A Stinkfest**

Mr. Scott with your overpraise for this movie and Beasts of The Southern Wild, you set your standards far too low. While you call this movie "honest, surefooted, and emotionally generous." I call it lazy, rambling, and cynical with the idea that if you just film famous people conversing suckers will pay to see it in a theater. At the screening I went to twenty people bought tickets and an hour in eight of them walked out. I wished I valued my time enough to be one of them. For my full review got to <http://pablochiste.com/2012/08/02/independence-aint-no-excuse-beasts-of-...>

– *Pablo Chiste, Los Angeles, Ca*

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July 27th, 2012 11:28 am

Rating 

#### **4. Ridiculous and pretentious**

Ridiculous

– *Phil, New York, NY*

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 2 Readers

July 25th, 2012 10:07 pm

Rating 

#### **3. very real**

A very fine review of a fine movie. I'm sure many people, like the second commentator in this thread, won't get it, have seen too many romantic comedies, but it is very real. Scott's statement that "The wounding power of love, its essential asymmetry and unfairness, permeates "Take This Waltz." The one thing you know for sure is that someone — maybe everyone — is going to get hurt" sums it up as well as any single sentence could.

– *Bill a, Salt Lake City*

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July 22nd, 2012 9:26 am

Rating 

#### **2. Tedious and self-indulgent.**

Aside from the luminous brilliance of Michelle Williams, this movie seemed to me to be very contrived: the childish games of Lou and Margot, the statutory family get together, the recovering alcoholic sister-in-law. I found husband Lou - played with his usual lumbering gaucheness by Seth Rogen - to be as dull as his choice of endless chicken dishes. The character Margot, in spite of the gamine magnetism projected by Ms. Williams, was just a sheer pain. Why didn't she act like a grown up. For heaven's sake, sleep with the guy and move on! And there were at least three points where the story could have ended.



Enough already with all the moping and pouting!

– Brian Johnson, Amagansett NY

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 4 Readers

July 22nd, 2012 9:26 am

Rating 

### 1. Changing Partners

The best movie I've seen about starter marriage and the emotional changes we endure/enjoy in our late '20s.

– meliflaw, Berkeley, CA

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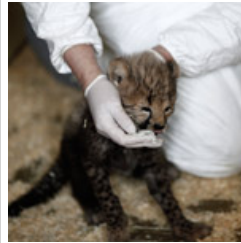
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