

The New York Times

Review: In ‘Porto,’ a Night of Bliss and Heartbreak

Writers: Larry Gross, Gabe Klinger

NOV. 16, 2017



Lucie Lucas and Anton Yelchin in “Porto.” Kino Lorber

“Porto” named for the coastal city in Portugal where it takes place, is a wistful mood piece about a one-night stand between mismatched expats, an American man and a Frenchwoman.

The movie’s true subject, however, is time: its passage and promise, its weight and disappointments. Looping backward and forward — and using no fewer than three types of film stock — this first narrative feature from Gabe Klinger seduces with breathtakingly gorgeous visuals that feel both achingly nostalgic and elegantly modern.

These often ravishing aesthetics and stylistic quirks act as soft restraints, keeping us watching despite a near-total absence of story and a thinly disguised attitude of male entitlement. When Jake (Anton Yelchin) spies Mati (Lucie

Lucas) in a late-night cafe, he begins a conversation that ends on a mattress in her apartment. She is a sexually confident student in her 30s with a history of vague mental illness; he is a 26-year-old drifter with no ambition and a bad back.

Their sole night together — revisited repeatedly throughout the film in increasing detail — unspools with little preamble and the clichéd shorthand of sexual fantasy. A mesmerizingly beautiful woman offers herself, multiple times, to an intense and needy stranger, who brings her to previously unknown orgasmic heights. (One shot of Ms. Lucas, posing provocatively in lingerie and top hat, directly recalls Lena Olin's sexually adventurous character in "The Unbearable Lightness of Being".

So when Jake falls in love (with stalker-like obsession) and Mati moves on, we are primed to view her as flighty and unreliable. Tainted by a script that tells us virtually nothing about her past other than that she was once a little crazy, her later choices seem callous and questionable. Yet, to any sensible woman, Jake is a terrible bet, directionless and shady — we've already seen him try to wheedle drinks from strange women — and the movie's refusal to call him out is irksome.

The choice of Mr. Yelchin, however — whose recent death casts a sad shadow over an already melancholy film — goes some way toward making the character more sympathetically tragic than he deserves to be. With his gaunt cheekbones and haunted eyes, the actor adds a yearning quality to Jake's restless perambulations. Alone on the damply cobbled streets, wrapped in Wyatt Garfield's sensual cinematography, he seems no more than a scrap of a person, as insubstantial as infatuation itself.