

L.A. Times

[Jordan Raup](#)



Sundance 2017 Review

Independent; 97 minutes

Director: Michelle Morgan

✎ Written by on January 21, 2017

Opening on intricately hand-painted, colorful postcards featuring Los Angeles sights, the distinct eye of **Michelle Morgan** immediately emerges. Her directorial debut, which she also wrote and leads, takes inspiration from a variety of sources, from these Wes Anderson-esque opening credits to the Whit Stillman-styled dialogue, but as the film progresses and a comedic rhythm clicks into place, **L.A. Times** blazes its own distinct, disenchanting trail of romance in the modern age.

Annette (Morgan) couldn't ask for a nicer boyfriend than Elliot (**Jorma Taccone**, flexing more than capable dramatic muscles alongside the comedy), a TV writer for a *Game of Thrones* rip-off who pays all their bills. However, as Annette looks at the seemingly happier couples in their friend circle and begins to nitpick Elliot's actions — limited to making her walk uphill, help with taking in the garbage cans, and inquiring about the acting gig of a friend — she decides to pull the plug and take a break after five years together. So begins their separate lives of romantic freedom and, of course, self-discovery.



As Annette singles out the most available romantic prospect — with the prerequisites being “single and alive” — meanwhile her friend Baker (**Dree Hemingway**) segues from a cursory fling with her client, the married Tom (**Tate Donovan**), to peculiarly evolving one related to her well-meaning cousin (a charming **Kentucker Audley**). Then there’s Elliot, who has used this sexual liberty to strike up a relationship with a local prostitute Ingrid (**Margarita Levieva**), featuring both the best chemistry of the film and a flawless visual touch to encapsulate this attachment.

Largely populated by self-obsessed types who are more enthralled by the latest trend in the City of Angels than genuinely listening to the pressing issues of their friends, it can take the entire first act of *L.A. Times* for the characters to feel more than cynical line delivery machines. It’s not so much that the comedy evolves, as Morgan hardly misses a beat when it comes to succinct jabs, but rather a particular charm and honesty emerges with the unwavering commitment to narcissism. What begins as a seemingly easy hit-job on vapid lifestyles with an all-too-familiar logline becomes much more clearly defined in the loquacious mind of Morgan.



Mostly utilizing two shots with spare cuts for conversations, there's a confidence in the filmmaking largely missing in today's indie comedies. With Morgan's specific, slightly heightened diction, the dialogue refreshingly never comes across as improvisation. Nearly every line has a punch to it, making the laughs all the more effective. With a thoughtful eye for framing — reminiscent of Jody Lee Lipes' work in *Tiny Furniture*, albeit less sterile — **Nicholas Wiesnet's** cinematography patiently finds more beauty in the city than last year's *La La Land*. It's also a personal rarity to single out the costume and production design work, but presumably on a tight budget, **Heather Allison** and **Hillary Gurtler**, respectively, do wonders to make each aspect as visually appealing as possible.

Perhaps those living in Los Angeles will find certain observations overbearingly cynical, but as an outsider, *L.A. Times* strikes the difficult balance of both poking fun at itself and harboring a love for the city and those that inhabit it. With jokes about the film industry (separate budding writers both believe they have ties to Brazilian horror investors), the weather (scarf recommendations at the brisk temperature of 60), the traffic (Waze doesn't get off easy), the vapidness (a Charades game gone wrong), and the

food (complaining about finding a place with a real table rather than a taco truck), few stones are left unturned.

In an age where the modus operandi of love-seeking is ever-changing, a film can feel immediately dated on its journey from script to screen, yet Morgan's voice feels like one of the freshest on this particular topic in some time. Eschewing the insufferable nature of the bulk of today's romantic comedies, *L.A. Times* stands apart with striking style in its self-aware shallowness.

L.A. Times premiered at Sundance Film Festival.



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