

‘Her Smell’ Review: Elisabeth Moss Is One of the Most Noxious Movie Characters of All Time in Brave and Rewarding Punk Epic

TIFF: Alex Ross Perry's intimate punk epic dares you to walk out from the moment it starts, but rewards those who stick it out to the end.

[David Ehrlich](#)

So about that title. It stinks. It's pungent and rancid. "[Her Smell](#)" *could* have a positive connotation, but you just know that it doesn't here. There's a hostility to it, like an odorous barrier you'd have to get through in order to reach the woman exuding it. Viewers familiar with any of [Alex Ross Perry's](#) previous films will probably be holding their noses as they walk into this one. Newbies might want to follow suit.

Perry knows what he's doing. His work has always had the courage to be profoundly unpleasant. We're talking about a guy whose breakthrough film ("The Color Wheel") was a micro-budget 16mm road trip comedy that built to a sudden eruption of incest, and whose comparatively star-studded follow-ups ("Listen Up, Philip," "Queen of Earth," and "Golden Exits") have shined a light on some of New York's shittiest people. The most "likable character" in his entire body of work is a cat named Gadzookey. But if all of Perry's stories have been hard to stomach, "Her Smell" takes things to impressive new lows before hitting bottom and tunneling out through the other side. It's truly one of the most noxious movies ever made, which might help to explain why it's also Perry's best.

Imagine if Danny Boyle's "Steve Jobs" was about Courtney Love in the mid-'90s and you'll be on the right track. Chronicling the reckless fall and cautious rise of punk rocker Becky Something — lead singer of the band Something She — "Her Smell" is told across five long scenes that stretch over 10 years, each of the vignettes unfolding in real time. Three of them take place in the snaking bowels of a concert venue's backstage area, where the drug-addled riot grrrl (a bravely loathsome and unhinged Elisabeth Moss) is surrounded by fellow musicians (Amber Heard), her manager (Eric Stoltz as Howard Goodman), her mother (Virginia Madsen), her ex (Dan Stevens), their baby, and even some kind of huckster shaman who she's paid to cloud her mind with nonsense.

Every member of this motley crew is hanging on for dear life, trying to weather a storm that's been raging around them since Becky Something first became famous. Most of them seem like decent people, especially Becky's two longtime bandmates: Ali van der Wolff ("GLOW" star Gayle Rankin) and the

star's closest friend, Marielle Hell (a raw and layered Agyness Deyn, already making good on the incredible promise she displayed in "Sunset Song").

The other girls are guilty of all the usual vices, but they're nothing like their lead singer. Becky is nothing short of a manic emotional terrorist on bath salts. She's your estranged older sister, the girl you don't want to talk to at a party, the crazy lady on the bus, and the musician who's auditioning for her own episode of "Behind the Music" all rolled into one. She exclusively speaks in the kind of coked out, incoherent stage banter that demands some applause even if you can't understand it; one second she's smiling, the next she's trying to stab Marielle with a shard of broken glass. The more Becky smiles, the harder she cries. Her mascara runs an ultra-marathon every night. Nobody describes her smell, but I'd guess it's something like the stench that would come from throwing a cherry bomb into a meth lab.

Later, after it becomes clear that Becky is far too broken to finish her new album, Howard signs a wide-eyed trio called the Akergirls in a desperate bid to save his label, the film's ridiculously loaded cast growing even larger with the introduction of Ashley Benson, Cara Delevingne, and Dylan Gelula (all of whom are terrific, even if their specific pop-punk vibe doesn't feel like it has any real cultural precedent, and the movie suffers as a result). Becky is the rotted trunk of a wilting family tree that's still adding new branches, and Perry forces us to watch the decay from the inside out.



"Her Smell"

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More loudly stylized than his earlier films, "Her Smell" is visceral nightmare from the moment it starts; if the script evokes John Cassavetes, the aesthetic seems more inspired by Gaspar No . Sean Price Williams' sinuous 35mm tracking shots follow Becky and her bandmates through the grimy backstage halls, taking us deep into a labyrinth of pain and self-preservation. Keegan DeWitt's queasy, bass-heavy score pounds through the ceiling, like the entire first half of the movie takes place on the floor below the loudest house party of all time. Huge chunks of the dialogue are drowned out by the din, which is just as well, because every word you hear from Becky makes you loathe her more.

Moss is such a whirling dervish that you can't help but fear for the safety of those around her. You wonder how they don't give up. "Where do you find the faith?" one of them asks. It's a rhetorical question. At this point, it's hard to believe that Perry even knows where to look.

But then it turns. Time passes. We realize that, in broad strokes, "Her Smell" is sort of like "A Star Is Born" in reverse (though Olivier Assayas' "Clean"

might be the more helpful reference point). Becky gets sober, the film u-turns towards catharsis, and — for the first time in his career — Perry leans hard into sincerity. The second half of the movie is so rich and hopeful that it almost feels like a sweet reward for not walking out of the theater. After running our hands under a burning hot faucet for more than an hour, Perry turns off the tap and lets the burn sink in.

Highlighted by a moving and uncut piano rendition of Bryan Adams’ “Heaven” — easily the most convincing music scene in the movie, as Moss’ looks sheepish and lost when she’s onstage for the Something She gigs — these scenes are an absolute reckoning, and they get under our skin because of all we had to suffer through in order to see them.

One beautifully framed shot, in which Moss strums a guitar with her back turned to Deyn, aches with a lifetime of regret, as we come to appreciate how Becky wore her addiction (and general awfulness) as a suit of armor to protect herself from, well, everything *but* herself. As much as the people in her life used to need her, she needs them now even more. It’s unexpectedly moving to see the most narcissistic and insufferable character Perry has ever written earn a chance to become his most redemptive, as well.

It takes an unfathomable degree of confidence to bury such a resonant story about the strength we get from each other in the backend of an obscenely unpleasant 135-minute ordeal that’s designed to make you give up on the movie at every turn, but that bold stroke is what allows the final chapters of “Her Smell” to go up your nose and get under your skin. For us, it feels like an endurance test. For Perry, it carries the whiff of an exorcism. Time passes. People change. Artists grow up, and sometimes the good ones get even better.

Grade: B+

“Her Smell” premiered at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.

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