

Linklater Re-Captures Magic in "Before Sunset": Also, "First Daughter"

Written by Mike Schulz

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BEFORE SUNSET

Richard Linklater has directed some marvelous films in the past – particularly *Dazed & Confused*, *School of Rock*, *The School of Rock*, and (his best work until now) 1995's *Before Sunrise* – but he has never created one as stunningly, ravishingly alive as *Before Sunset*.

I'm almost afraid to say just *how* good I think this movie is; it's so smart and funny and achingly romantic that I never wanted it to end. The film is, of course, a follow-up to Linklater's *Before Sunrise*, and it is, hands down, one of the greatest sequels ever made, one that expands your understanding and appreciation of its characters and makes you love the original all the more. Yet it's also a staggering work on its own terms, beautifully filmed and gloriously well-written and performed; *Before Sunset* is currently playing at the Brew & View, but it might run in your head and heart forever.

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In *Before Sunrise*, two twentysomethings – the Parisian, though slightly Americanized, Celine (Julie Delpy) and the oh-so-American Jessie (Ethan Hawke) – meet on a train traveling through Europe, hit it off, and spontaneously decide to disembark in Vienna, where they spend the movie's running length seeing the sights and talking incessantly; *Sunrise* is all about finding intellectual and emotional soul mates, and it stands as one of film's wittiest, most bracing love stories. At the movie's end, when the pair must inevitably go their separate ways – and stop reading now if you haven't seen

Sunrise

and don't want any surprises spoiled – they decide that, instead of exchanging addresses or phone numbers (or even last names), they'll reunite in Vienna exactly six months later. Yet, as we learn in the sequel's opening minutes, one of them missed the rendezvous. Now, nine years have passed, and Jessie is in a Parisian bookstore promoting his best-seller – a slightly fictionalized take on his evening with Celine – when Celine herself walks in the door. Clearly thrilled to see one another, yet nervous and slightly wary, the pair agrees to spend the next hour together before Jessie has to catch a plane back to the States, and as the hour passes (the film, which runs a brisk 80 minutes, unfolds in real time), Jessie and Celine re-connect, laugh, quarrel, and find that none of their feelings for one another have diminished in the slightest. Still, nine years

have

passed; everything about their lives is different now, and Jessie has to be on that plane.

What makes *Before Sunset* so emotionally overwhelming is that ticking clock that drives the film: How do you convey nine years' worth of experience to the love of your life in an hour

? With so much to say and so little time to say it,

Before Sunset

, like its predecessor, is overflowing with conversation, but while much of their discussion covers old ground – the fragility of time, the nature of love, the state of the world and their places in it – the film's tone is almost radically different from

Sunrise

's. Now in their 30s, Jessie and Celine aren't the unabashed romantics they once were; mortality is less a vague concept than a constantly hovering inevitability, and disappointment over the past and fear for the future inflect their every utterance.

Before Sunset

is wise enough to suggest the

terror

behind growing older and the paucity of new experiences; both Jessie and Celine are afraid to reach out, yet more afraid of the regret they'll feel if they

don't

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For what is essentially an extended, two-character conversation, Linklater directs with supreme skill, vividly employing light and shadow to underline his characters' emotional states, and letting his camera – always moving, to remind us that time for the pair is rapidly elapsing – run for minutes on end while Jessie and Celine walk and talk; the majority of the film is presented in a series of unbroken takes, and it gives *Before Sunset* an almost theatrical electricity. (His editing is also astonishing: Delpy's first appearance is timed so perfectly that the mere sight of her brings tears to your eyes, and the film's final fade-out, preceded by a flawless line of dialogue, is as thoroughly satisfying as you could hope for.) Yet it would be easy to undervalue Linklater's contributions as a director; his script – which he co-wrote with Hawke and Delpy – is so strong that you can imagine it unfolding in an unbroken, 80-minute shot and being just as mesmerizing. Like *Sunrise, Sunset* is

very shrewd about how it reveals information – more than half the movie passes before the couple

finally

reveals whether or not they're involved with anyone, and who knew that Celine/Delpy could *sing*

? – and every once in a while a monologue or line of dialogue will knock you for a loop; when Jessie, reminiscing about their fateful night together, says, "I remember that night better than I remember some

years

," the absolute

rightness

of the sentiment takes your breath away.

The performances couldn't possibly be better. Ethan Hawke has long been denied his placement as one of our greats – there's a rawness to his acting, combined with a spontaneity and playfulness, that brings to mind Sean Penn and Johnny Depp – but he outdoes himself in *Sunrise*

, letting loose with bursts of self-directed anger and a nearly naked emotionalism. And when he stares with abject wonder at Julie Delpy, with her loose, incredibly appealing comic style and exquisite sadness, you feel that you, too, could go on watching her for the rest of your life.

Hawke and Delpy are so fine and so deeply in character that, although we've seen both in numerous film roles since 1995, it feels like even the

actors

have been away from us for nine years, and until now, you didn't realize just how much you missed them.

Before Sunset

feels like the most emotionally fulfilling reunion you've ever been a part of, and it's easily the movie experience of the year.

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FIRST DAUGHTER

Since I managed to successfully avoid Mandy Moore's *Chasing Liberty* earlier this year, I had absolutely no interest in viewing its *doppelganger*

First Daughter

. But I must admit that my curiosity was piqued by the casting of that iconic '80s hipster, Michael Keaton, as the president of the United States. What kind of America would elect such a jovially untrustworthy, shifty-eyed comedian to its highest office? (Hmmm) That question, though, will forever remain one of the great unanswerables, because Keaton's only purpose in the film is to act as Katie Holmes' lovably grumpy, overly concerned dad; in the film's world, it's easy to imagine a few summit meetings being missed whenever little Katie had a ballet recital.

First Daughter

is witless pap, of course, without the slightest grounding in the real world, and it makes you long for someone like Tina Fey or Paul Rudnick to take a swipe at this genre: Isn't it time for a first-daughter comedy in which the titular child of privilege drops acid, pukes on her sorority sisters, and makes life hell for the president's spin doctors?