

THINGS TO COME

Monday, February 27, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A. O. Scott / NYT *Rated PG-13* *100 Mins.*

Here are a few things to argue about, if you need distraction from all the other arguments going on right now. Isabelle Huppert: great actress or world's greatest actress? Once that is settled (in favor of the second option, of course), we can turn to more advanced Huppertiana. Is she the queen of sang-froid or the avatar of extremity? Does she freeze the screen or burn it down? Does she inspire pity or terror?

The last question, with its echo of Aristotle, might be of interest to Nathalie, Ms. Huppert's character in "Things to Come," Mia Hansen-Love's new movie. Nathalie is a philosophy professor, and the script bristles with casual allusions to famous and obscure philosophers. (Plot points include a misplaced copy of Schopenhauer and a learned text on Max Horkheimer.) She may not have everything figured out — a true intellectual, she is too circumspect for certainty — but it seems safe to say that she has arrived at midlife with a measure of wisdom and a solid foundation of comfort.

In the course of the movie, all of that will collapse, in ways that are both perfectly ordinary and utterly catastrophic. Nathalie loses her mother (Édith Scob) and her husband, Heinz (André Marcon), a fellow philosopher who has fallen in love with someone else. There are troubles on the professional front as well, including some awful meetings with the dynamic and innovative crew of young cretins who seem to have taken over the operations of Nathalie's longtime publisher.



Not everything is terrible, and Nathalie is too stoical, too analytical and too much of an ironist to engage in self-pity. She has mostly warm relationships with her grown children — and a new grandchild in the picture — and an intriguing, unsettling friendship with a talented former student named Fabien (Roman Kolinka). The

possibility of romance hovers in the air between them like a theoretical construct trying to break into reality.

Ms. Hansen-Love observes the vagaries of Nathalie's situation with compassion and lucidity. Her films — this is her fourth feature — often turn on intimate calamities, like a husband's suicide (in "Father of My Children") or a painful breakup (in "Goodbye First Love"). But she is temperamentally allergic to melodrama, and far less interested in the easy shocks and tidy consolations of plot than in the meandering, almost random texture of lived experience. The French title of "Things to Come" (it's also the name of an old British science-fiction movie) is "L'Avenir," which more literally means "the future" and which more accurately conveys the film's open-ended, exploratory structure.

If Ms. Hansen-Love's film overcomes these limitations, it's because of Ms. Huppert, whose best performances often feel like dialogues — or outright arguments — with her directors. In a recent article in *The New Republic*, the critic Miriam Bale has described the way Ms. Huppert, in Paul Verhoeven's "Elle" — a film about a Parisian woman of a certain age that is as lurid and aggressive as this one is calm and thoughtful — assumes control over the character and her story. "Her performance is a clear case of actress as auteur," Ms. Bale writes, an observation that strikes me as at least partly true in the case of "Things to Come."



Traveling from Paris to the countryside (where Fabien and some friends have set up a sort of anarchist commune), Nathalie finds herself both freer than she used to be and constrained by norms and expectations of which she had been only partly aware. Her identity has come unraveled, and she needs to figure out how to put together a new one, at once an ideal and an especially difficult project for a philosopher. It is also, of course, what actors do all the time, but almost never with Ms. Huppert's combination of unbridled instinct and absolute control. Nathalie reinvents herself before our eyes, and we believe what we see because Ms. Huppert is doing it too.

In French with English subtitles.

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NERUDA

Monday, March 13, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Justin Chang / LA Times *Rated R* *107 Mins.*

"Neruda," an intoxicating puzzle of a movie directed by Pablo Larraín, chronicles a strange, harrowing episode from the late 1940s, when the Chilean government's crackdown on communism drove the great poet and politician Pablo Neruda underground. The film unravels the tricky game of cat-and-mouse between Neruda and an ambitious police inspector named Oscar Peluchonneau, who sought to track down the dissident artist whose writings had struck a dangerously resonant chord with the working class.

There was, in fact, no Oscar Peluchonneau — or at least, none who fits the description blithely concocted by Larraín and his screenwriter, Guillermo Calderon. The charm of "Neruda" lies in its insistence that there may well have been, and that it scarcely matters if there wasn't. Drolly and persuasively, the movie demonstrates that when it comes to evoking the artist and the nature of his art, historical fidelity and literal-minded dramatization go only so far. Fiction, lovingly and imaginatively rendered, can bring us much closer to the truth.

"We must dream our way," Neruda once wrote, and it is nothing short of enchanting to encounter a biographical drama that, rather than merely shoving that quote into its protagonist's mouth, treats it as a guiding aesthetic and philosophical principle. Like (and yet completely unlike) "I'm Not There," Todd Haynes' fragmented 2007 cine-riff on Bob Dylan, "Neruda" is less a straightforward portrait of a great contemporary poet (and eventual Nobel laureate) than a rigorously sustained investigation of his inner world.

Although informed by the busy workings of history, politics and personal affairs, "Neruda" proceeds like a light-footed chase thriller filtered through an episode of "The Twilight Zone," by the end of which the audience is lost in a crazily spiraling meta-narrative. Who exactly is the star and author of that narrative is one of the film's more enticing mysteries.

Initially it seems both roles must be filled by Pablo Neruda, played with prickly, preening brilliance by Luis Gnecco ("Narcos"), who donned a wig and gained more than 50 pounds to achieve his remarkable physical resemblance to the real deal. The key to the performance is that, despite the shimmering inspiration of Neruda's poetry, neither Gnecco nor Larraín seems to feel any obligation to make Neruda himself a particularly inspiring figure.

From the opening scene, a political gathering wittily set in an enormous public lavatory, Neruda, a senator and member of the Chilean Communist Party, is shown to be a proud and vociferous critic of his country's leadership. But in the very next sequence, a lavish party crammed with half-naked revelers, the film presents the idea of Neruda as a Champagnian socialist — a vain, hedonistic hypocrite who, like so many left-wing elites, loves "to soak up other people's sweat and suffering."

That damning bit of mockery is delivered by the aforementioned detective, Oscar Peluchonneau (played with mustachioed elan by Gael García Bernal), who slyly complicates the film's notions of authorship and agency. When Chilean President Gabriel González Videla (Alfredo Castro) outlaws communism in 1948, responding to mounting Cold War anxieties, Peluchonneau eagerly leads the manhunt for Neruda, who has gone into hiding in the port city of Valparaíso with his second wife, the painter Delia del Carril (Mercedes Morán, excellent).

Many of the individual scenes in "Neruda" serve a fairly clear narrative purpose. We see the poet consorting with his allies, arguing with his wife, and disobeying his party-appointed bodyguard (Michael Silva) to slip out for a frolic at a nearby brothel or bohemian enclave. We rarely see him writing, though his poems are shown being secretly distributed and playing a huge role in keeping the communist movement alive underground. But even these relatively simple moments are transformed and complicated by the sheer audacity of Larraín's stylistic conceits.

In the hands of the editor Hervé Schneid, an extended conversation between two people might span three or four different locations, transporting the viewer without warning from a private room to a perch overlooking the Chilean countryside. Elsewhere, Sergio Armstrong's sensuous digital photography evokes the mood of the past even as it encourages us to view the film as a formalist construct, from the faded, purplish coloration of the images to the use of phony-looking rear projection in the driving scenes.

In one of Larraín and Calderon's most telling flourishes, it is Peluchonneau who provides the film's running voice-over commentary, often in contrapuntal harmony with Neruda's journey. The two men are almost never seen in the same frame, and yet the ever-mobile camera seems to ping-pong restlessly between them, as though blurring them into one shared, active consciousness.

Peluchonneau's words may be sardonic and self-flattering, but as the film advances and his own footing in the narrative begins to shift, they also take on their own mysterious, downright Nerudian poetry. (A few verses from his posthumously published "For All to Know" might seem appropriate here: "I am everybody and every time/I always call myself by your name.")

"Neruda's" formal spryness and nontraditional appreciation of history will come as little surprise to admirers of "Jackie," Larraín's other great bio-experiment of the moment, or his 2012 drama, "No," a compelling snapshot of the end of the Augusto Pinochet regime that also starred Bernal (with Gnecco and Castro in prominent supporting roles). His filmography, which includes such festival-acclaimed favorites as "Tony Manero," "Post Mortem" and "The Club," has sealed his reputation as one of the most distinctive and continually surprising talents in world cinema, though nothing he's done to date has forced him to take such intuitive leaps, to abandon realism so completely, as "Neruda."



Unspooling the picture earlier this year at the Cannes Film Festival, Larraín confessed that, even after making the movie, he wasn't at all sure he knew who Neruda was. And in a typically counter-intuitive gesture, "Neruda" doesn't pretend to know, either. It keeps the man at a playful distance, firm in its belief that the art will sustain our interest, long after the passing of the artist and his historical moment. It's possible that Pablo Neruda himself would have concurred with this sentiment, though Oscar Peluchonneau might have begged to differ. In Spanish with English Subtitles.

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post screening discussions!*

AQUARIUS

Monday, March 27, 7:30 pm

Screening at Ogden 6 / 1227 E. Ogden, Naperville

Reviewed Justin Chang / LA Times Not Rated 142 Mins.

The title of "Aquarius" refers to a two-story apartment complex, located in the Brazilian coastal city of Recife, that has clearly seen better days. By the end of Kleber Mendonça Filho's gorgeous, ruminative new film, this endangered piece of real estate has come to feel like not just a milieu but a metaphor. Crumbling and nearly abandoned, it suggests the last gasp of a close-knit, community-focused way of life, one that is fast being leveled by a young generation with sharp business instincts, deep pockets and minimal regard for human consequences.

The last remaining resident of Aquarius, and the indomitable heroine of this movie, is a 65-year-old retiree named Clara, played to role-of-a-lifetime perfection by the great Sonia Braga. Her beauty toughened but undiminished by a life rich in happiness and heartache, Clara still lives in the family apartment she inherited from her aunt and shared with her late husband, surrounded by records, old photographs and other memorabilia from her long career as a music journalist.

We hear plenty of that music throughout "Aquarius," whose soundtrack flows freely between classic rock tunes and Brazilian pop standards. A 1980-set beachfront idyll arrives with a blast of Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust," while "Hoje" ("Today"), by the late Brazilian singer-activist Taiguara, bookends the movie with a glorious surge of feeling.

Notably, the wall-to-wall music never feels merely decorative in a film with an almost Proustian understanding of how a favorite song — or, for that matter, a sacred space or a cherished piece of furniture — can become a repository of personal meaning.

Few things matter more to Clara than her memories, save perhaps her independence. Both of these are embodied by her apartment, which explains why she's in no hurry to turn it over to Diego (Humberto Carrão), a smarmy young developer who's hoping to add yet another high-rise to Recife's rapidly changing skyline. To that end, Diego launches a slowly escalating campaign of harassment against Clara, setting in motion a clash of wills that Mendonça Filho sees through to a most satisfying comeuppance.

It's thrilling to watch Clara stare down the system, greeting the developer's simpering overtures with first a steely smile, then a well-earned blast of moral outrage. "Aquarius" presents her with no shortage of additional targets for her anger, from the racial and

class-based disparities that have long held sway to the nepotism and corruption that have taken root in places of power.

That Mendonça Filho shares some of Clara's dismay was clear enough when "Aquarius" premiered in May at the Cannes Film Festival, where the director and his cast publicly denounced the political upheaval at home, including the recent suspension of Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff. Mendonça Filho and other Brazilian filmmakers have since accused the interim government of interfering with the selection of Brazil's Academy Awards entry in the foreign-language film race in order to punish "Aquarius," which had been widely perceived as the logical candidate. (The selection committee wound up submitting David Schurmann's "Little Secret.")

Happily, there are reasons to see "Aquarius" beyond the pleasure of lodging a protest vote. Mendonça Filho, a former film critic, is both a gifted sensualist and an instinctively analytical storyteller, and in the course of just two features he has established himself as an unusually incisive chronicler of his country's social malaise. His first feature, "Neighboring Sounds" (2012), was a brilliantly directed ensemble piece set in another Recife housing complex, which captured some of the tensions and contradictions of contemporary Brazilian society in microcosm.

While it gets at many of the same ideas, "Aquarius" is looser and mellow than its predecessor, less formally exacting and more classically told. And while it features a cast of more than 50 characters, many of them played by nonprofessional actors, it departs significantly from "Neighboring Sounds" by limiting its perspective to that of a single, dominant figure. Once you've cast a screen presence like Braga, a Brazilian acting legend best known for "Kiss of the Spider Woman" and "Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands," putting her front and center is the only decent thing to do.

With her radiantly stern mien and hard-to-win smile, Clara has the no-nonsense air of someone who's long since stopped caring what anyone thinks of her, whether it's the hustlers on her doorstep or even her three grown children, who to varying degrees encourage her to consider Diego's offer. But as she enjoys a night out with her girlfriends or idly looks after her grandson, it's clear that her tough, brittle veneer has done nothing to dull her astonishing capacity for joy, tenderness and desire.

In interviews and press materials, Mendonça Filho has playfully likened his film to a time-travel story. He consistently uses the subtlest, most ordinary effects — a musical trigger, a telling camera placement, a joltingly erotic flashback — to plant us deep within Clara's memories, collapsing the distance between now and then.

Some might well accuse this stubbornly singular woman of living in the past, but to watch "Aquarius" is to see her surrendering again and again to the bliss of the present moment — never more so than in a final scene of thrilling, annihilating ferocity. Another one bites the dust, indeed. In Portuguese with English subtitles.

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drama."

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beauty, and power."

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Monday, March 13 at 7:30 pm

NERUDA

"Blazingly intelligent, funny, dignified and sexy as
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Monday, March 27 at 7:30 pm

AQUARIUS

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