



Monday, December 12, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Roger Ebert | RogerEbert.com | Rated PG | 102 Mins.

The most enchanting quality about "Moonstruck" is the hardest to describe, and that is the movie's tone. Reviews of the movie tend to make it sound like a madcap ethnic comedy, and that it is. But there is something more here, a certain bittersweet yearning that comes across as ineffably romantic, and a certain magical quality that is reflected in the film's title.



And at the heart of the story, there is Cher's astonishing discovery that she is still capable of love. As the movie opens, she becomes engaged to Mr. Johnny Cammareri (Danny Aiello), not so much out of love as out of weariness. But after he flies to Sicily to be at the bedside of his dying mother, she goes to talk to Mr. Johnny's estranged younger brother (Nicolas Cage), and is thunderstruck when they are drawn almost instantly into a passionate embrace.

"Moonstruck" was directed by Norman Jewison and written by John Patrick Shanley, and one of their accomplishments is to allow the film to be about all of these people (and several more, besides). This is an ensemble comedy, and a lot of the laughs grow out of the sense of family that Jewison and Shanley create. There are small, hilarious moments involving the exasperation that Dukakis feels for her ancient father-in-law (Feodor Chaliapin), who lives upstairs with his dogs. (In the course of a family dinner, she volunteers, "Feed one more bite of my food to your dogs, old man, and I'll kick you to death!") As Cher's absent fiance lingers at his mother's bedside, Cher and Cage grow even more desperately passionate, and Cher learns the secret of the hatred between the two brothers: One day Aiello made Cage look the wrong way at the wrong time, and he

lost his hand in a bread-slicer. Now he wears an artificial hand and carries an implacable grudge in his heart.

But grudges and vendettas and old wounds and hatreds are everywhere in this film. The mother knows, for example, that her husband is having an affair. She asks from the bottom of her heart why this should be so, and a friend replies, "Because he is afraid of dying." She sees at once that this is so. But does that cause her to sympathize with her husband? Hardly. One night he comes home. She asks where he has been. He replies, "Nowhere." She tells him she wants him to know one thing: "No matter where you go, or what you do - you're gonna die." Some of these moments are so charged with tension they remind us of the great opening scenes of "Saturday Night Fever" (and the mother from that movie, Julie Bovasso, is on hand here, as an aunt). But all of the passion is drained of its potential for hurt, somehow, by the influence of the moon, which has enchanted these people and protects them from the consequences of their frailties. Jewison captures some of the same qualities of Ingmar Bergman's "Smiles of a Summer Night," in which nature itself conspires with lovers to bring about their happiness.

The movie is filled with fine performances - by Cher, never funnier or more assured; by Dukakis and Gardenia, as her parents, whose love runs as deep as their exasperation, and by Cage as the hapless, angry brother, who is so filled with hurts that he has lost track of what caused them. In its warmth and in its enchantment, as well as in its laughs, this is the best comedy in a long time. (Original four-star review from January 15, 1988.)

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AFTERSUN

Monday, January 9, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Richard Roeper | Chicago Sun-Times | Not Rated | 98 Mins.

Every moment, every snippet of dialogue, every detail down to the smallest role or the tiniest detail in the background feels like a vibrant slice of real life.

The Scottish writer-director Charlotte Wells' minimalist masterpiece "Aftersun" draws us into the lives of a father and daughter on a summer vacation in such a natural and gradual way that we feel like we truly know them as the days and nights go by, and we care deeply about them. And yet it still comes as something of a jolt when the final moments of this movie hit us SO hard, like a sledgehammer to the heart. We will not give away what happens (or doesn't happen) in those last scenes, other than to say it solidifies our feeling this is one of the best films of 2022.



Some movies are so artificial it feels as if nobody would ever say or do most of the things the characters say and do throughout the journey. With "Aftersun," every moment, every snippet of dialogue, every detail down to the smallest role or the tiniest detail in the background feels like a vibrant slice of real life. From the opening scene that is filtered through the hazy, grainy lens of a camcorder (remember camcorders?) to the closing credits, this feels real — and yet somewhat dreamlike throughout, like an extended memory.

With the exception of a few flash-forwards, "Aftersun" takes place over the course of several days late in the summer of 1999, with 11-year-old Sophie (Frankie Corio) joining her father Calum (Paul Mescal) for a holiday in a downscale Turkish resort populated

mostly by vacationing Brits. Sophie lives with her mother in Scotland and Calum lives in England, and it's clear her parents have been divorced for quite some time, and Calum's time with Sophie is limited, so they're determined to make the most of it. (Calum also has a cast on his arm and we're not sure what happened; let's just say it's not the only part of Calum that seems fractured and in need of healing.)

'Director Wells and cinematographer Gregory Oke shoot the story in a casual, handheld kind of way, and there are scenes shown from the viewpoint of Sophie's video camera, yet there's never that irritating, overly jumpy element to the visuals. It just feels like we're there with Calum and Sophie.

Calum is in his early 30s, and he and Sophie are sometimes mistaken for siblings — and Calum's parenting choices reflect his young age. He's not a bad parent; he's just a little lax, even as he expresses concerns about Sophie making the right choices as a tween. The resort they're staying at doesn't have much to offer beyond a crowded pool and some cheesy late-night entertainment, and we see glimpses of Calum's chagrin over being financially strapped, but the precocious and inquisitive and sweet Sophie couldn't care less about such things. She's having the time of her life: hanging out with some "cool" teenagers, staying up late with her pops, making friends with a boy her age at the arcade.

Still, Sophie is a very smart girl, and there are times when she sees (though doesn't fully understand) that her father is not in a good place. Calum has brought along a stack of books about self-improvement and meditation, and he often practices his tai chi moves, as if he's seeking some kind of higher truth and enlightenment, some sense of inner peace. But when we see Calum nervously smoking a cigarette on the balcony of their tiny room while Sophie sleeps inside, or when Calum refuses to join Sophie for a karaoke number and abandons her as she sings "Losing My Religion" in a voice that aches for her father to join her, to see her, to be with her, we understand Calum is in great pain. As much as he loves his daughter, as much as they both wish this holiday wouldn't end, Calum already knows it's probably best that he's not in Sophie's life every single day, and Sophie is beginning to see that as well.

"Aftersound" is peppered with neat little period-piece references; remember when "The Macarena" was a cringe-inducing thing? This makes for an even greater impact when the story rockets forward some 20 years for just a glimmer of a moment or two, when Sophie (played by Celia Rowson-Hall in the flash-forwards) is roughly the age her father was during that vacation and has a partner and a newborn baby. (We see a few totems from that holiday in Sophie's apartment, including one item that just kills us.) Two decades after that outwardly idyllic, sun-dappled getaway, it appears as if Sophie remembers it as one of the most beautiful and yet one of the most heartbreaking chapters in her entire life.

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Monday, January 23, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Justin Chang | Los Angeles Times | Not Rated | 86 Mins.

In one of the most astonishing sequences in “EO,” a rapturous hymn to the natural world from the 84-year-old Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski, a wandering donkey gets lost in a forest primeval. Night has fallen, but pools of moonlight illuminate this hushed, dark world in all its living glory. A little frog skims along the surface of a rushing stream. A skittering spider spins its web. An owl frowns down at the donkey from its treetop perch, as though registering an intruder’s presence. There are also a couple of howling wolves, a wary red fox and, in time, an array of green laser beams announcing the presence of nearby hunters, whose gunshots shatter the serenity of this woodland idyll.

The entire sequence tells much of the movie’s story in miniature. Again and again this donkey, known as EO (a approximation of the sound he makes), will experience a moment of freedom, only for a few human beings to come along and drag him back into harm’s way. If that risks making “EO” sound like a compendium of cruelty, rest assured that it isn’t, though it may speak to Skolimowski’s decades-long affinity for underdogs in movies like “Le Départ” (1967) and “Essential Killing” (2010). He knows that humans can be kind, but also that they can be abusive, with their often callous indifference to the rights and welfare of other creatures. The beauty that Skolimowski and the cinematographer Michal Dymek show us in “EO” — and shot for shot, this could be the year’s most breathtakingly beautiful movie — isn’t a denial of that cruelty, but a response to it.

It begins with a screen-flooding burst of red light and a thunderous passage from Pawel Mykietyn’s orchestral score, which pulses and surges hypnotically throughout. In this early moment, EO is part of a circus act with a young performer, Kasandra (Sandra Drzymalska), who coos to him, caresses his coat and gives him carrot muffins to eat. Kasandra becomes the love of his life, the human he dreams about and longs for after they’re separated and he is shipped off to his next home. But that’s as far as Skolimowski goes in imputing motives or desires to EO, apart from the basic compulsions to eat, rest and roam. As the director seems to signal with regular closeups of EO’s enormous eyes — they’re somehow both inscrutable and soulfully expressive — there are limits to how much we can enter into, or even imagine, a donkey’s inner life.

Others, however, are happy to speak on his behalf: “Can’t you see this animal suffers?” an activist yells during a protest that will cause the circus to disband and send EO and his fellow four-legged performers running in all directions. The rest of this swift and relentless 86-minute movie (which Skolimowski scripted with his wife, Ewa Piaskowska) follows the donkey on a zig-zagging trek across Poland to Italy, over rolling hills and man-made bridges, through tunnels and past wind turbines and into that enchanted forest. At one point, in a shot so serendipitous it feels almost supernatural, a herd of galloping horses materializes alongside EO’s transport vehicle, their exhilarating freedom throwing his confinement into painful relief.

Along the way there are brief stops at a newly opened barn, where EO is sweetly nuzzled (but also frightened) by majestic horses, and a raucous sporting event where he becomes a grievously abused

mascot for the winning team. From there he’s brought to a large facility where, by some whim of human mercy, he’s nursed back to health rather than put down. (Some of his neighbors aren’t so lucky.) From there he will ride along with a couple of drifters and eventually make his way to an Italian villa, where a countess played by none other than Isabelle Huppert breaks a few dishes and glares seductively at a hunky priest (Lorenzo Zurzolo). Huppert also becomes, I think, a kind of emblem of the larger European art-house cinema in whose domineering shadow this brilliant movie and its lowly, animalist (as opposed to lofty, humanist) concerns take root.

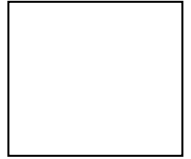
Which is not to suggest that “EO,” which shared the third-place jury prize at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, has gone unnoticed or unrecognized, though it could easily get lost at the few American theaters where it will be shown, as it should be, on the big screen. When I first saw “EO” at Cannes, it was spoken of, sometimes dismissively, as more or less a contemporary remake of “Au Hasard Balthazar,” Robert Bresson’s 1966 masterpiece about the life, death and extraordinary beauty of a donkey much like this one. Both Balthazar and EO love and are loved by a human, and both are forced to become beasts of burden. Both also bear deadpan witness to all manner of human awfulness and absurdity.

Skolimowski, for his part, has acknowledged “Au Hasard Balthazar” as both an inspiration and a point of departure. While both films share a clear empathy for their protagonists, their visual and rhythmic differences are no less obvious. Bresson’s stately black-and-white compositions and gently flowing dissolves are a far cry from Agnieszka Glinska’s jagged edits and Dymek’s sweeping, vibrant-hued camerawork, especially those angry shocks of red. (The boldness of the imagery speaks to Skolimowski’s background as a painter.) And while Bresson folded an intricate human drama into the background of “Balthazar,” the humans in “EO” are interesting but comparatively interstitial figures. Their problems and sufferings — one weeps, another dies — concern us only to the degree that they impact EO.

EO himself is played by six donkeys — their names are Hola, Tako, Marietta, Ettore, Rocco and Mela — who are fused, through seamless shooting and editing, into a character we come to know and love. The intimacy of the camerawork — the loving close-quarters attention it showers on EO with his sometimes downcast, sometimes excited gaze, his perked-up ears, his soft gray fur and the scrumptious string of carrots that at one point adorns his neck — itself feels like an expression of that love. Skolimowski isn’t really trying to convey EO’s perspective, aside from a few shots that suggest a donkey’s-eye view, with their low-to-the-ground angles and blurred edges. He seems more interested in capturing a sense of what it means to be in EO’s presence, bringing you close enough that you feel you could talk to him, breathe in his scent and run your fingers through his fur.

In “EO,” the camera doesn’t just follow the story or record the action. Its restless, exploratory movements express a kind of shared consciousness, a spirit of communion among different members of the animal world, whether they’re running together in a field or sharing the same tight enclosure. It’s the grace of this movie to extend that communion to the human beings who pass in front of the camera, and whose fates are tightly bound up with EO’s, whether they realize it or not. And finally, that communion is extended to the audience, and especially to those of us who go to the movies to be jolted, moved and have our sense of the universe shaken up or gently realigned. The world we share with EO is cold and cruel, which doesn’t mean we have to be.

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Monday, January 9 at 7:30 pm



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Monday, January 23 at 7:30 pm