

Acropolis Cinema
presents:



January 22 - 28, 2021 – Acropolis Virtual Cinema

ABOUT THE FILM

Márta Vizy (Natasa Stork) is a 39-year-old Hungarian neurosurgeon. After 20 years in the United States, she returns to Budapest for a romantic rendezvous at the Liberty Bridge with János (Viktor Bodó), a fellow doctor she met at a conference in New Jersey. Márta waits in vain, while the love of her life is nowhere to be seen. When she finally tracks him down, the bewildered man claims the two have never met.

In her second feature, following *The Wednesday Child* (2015), writer-director Lili Horvát evokes Sylvia Plath's haunting villanelle "Mad Girl's Love Song." *Preparations to Be Together For an Unknown Period of Time* spins a delicate web of contrasts and silent explosions that shift the viewer's understanding. Shot with impeccable symmetry on entrancing 35mm, it is an Orphic tale reminding us that, while the heart is an abstruse trickster, the human brain — ruling us with over 80 billion interconnected neurons — is our most complex organ.

95 min. | Hungary | 2020

Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time by Justin Chang

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"Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time," a wonderfully mysterious new film from the Hungarian writer-director Lili Horvát, is about a number of different things. At first glance, it appears to be a strange, noirish tale of love and misunderstanding, in which a missed connection and an unrequited attraction threaten to spiral into a full-blown obsession. That the would-be lovers are both neurosurgeons offers an early insight into one of the story's other subjects: the inner workings of the brain and the intricate, unpredictable circuitry that connects them to the desires of the heart.

But the movie, a recent festival standout that will represent Hungary in this year's international feature Oscar race, is also about something more concrete and less abstract, though not necessarily easier to parse. I am referring to the calm, otherworldly countenance of its protagonist, Dr. Márta Vizy, which is to say the actor Natasa Stork, whose coolly appraising gaze might be the most extraordinary visual effect, digitally manufactured or otherwise, I've encountered in recent movies. Márta's piercing blue eyes may be the windows to her soul, but their power is directed as much outward as inward. Without saying a word — indeed, by drawing on the innate power of stillness and silence — she transforms the very act of looking into a source of considerable suspense, sensuality and excitement.

The effect is most pronounced whenever Márta visits a therapist (Péter Tóth) in hopes of solving the riddle that her life has become. These consultations — in which her face is tightly framed in oddly angled, screen-filling closeups — are hypnotic, unsettling and more than a little funny. We're watching a doctor exceptionally well-versed in the anatomy of the human brain contemplating the limits of her own cognition and perception. Is she hallucinating or making things up, as teasingly suggested by the Sylvia Plath poem quoted at the outset? What is happening to her, exactly? "I have no idea," she says. "I'm not sure anymore."

We aren't either. As the movie opens, Márta, who was born in Hungary but has been working for years in New Jersey, has come to Budapest on a curious mission: to keep a romantic appointment she made with Dr. János Drexler (an excellent Viktor Bodó), whom she met at a medical conference back home a month earlier. But János doesn't show up, and when she tracks him down, he doesn't appear to recognize her, much less remember their brief encounter. Shocked and disappointed, Márta considers flying home but soon changes her mind, renting an apartment in Budapest and quickly landing a job at the hospital where János works.

Even as she keeps a close eye on János, observing and following him at a just-shy-of-stalkerish distance, her decisions seem born of not just a wild erotic impulse, but also a genuine, even scientific fascination. As its delightfully loquacious title suggests, "Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time" is both methodical and enigmatic. It's a movie that sees no real contradiction between the rational and irrational, only degrees of difference. The instinctive intelligence and curiosity that Márta brings to her emotional investigation, tempered by the kind of humility that only comes with great knowledge, is what makes her such an involving protagonist — someone you naturally want to follow down any rabbit hole that may present itself.

She also awakens your protectiveness, even in situations where it becomes clear that she doesn't need protecting. Despite or perhaps because of her superior medical credentials, her early days at the hospital are marked by sneering condescension from some of the other (male) surgeons. She draws the attention of a medical student named Alex (Benett Vilmányi), whose ailing father she's treating, and who seems incapable of seeing her as anything other than an incompetent fool or an object of desire. One of the pleasures of "Preparations to Be Together" is how tersely and efficiently Márta shuts down these assumptions, and also how little thought she gives to the sheepish apologies that invariably follow. She doesn't have time for fragile male egos; there's too much work to do.

She is, among other things, a master at compartmentalizing. She can be a model of competence under fire one minute, as demonstrated in one harrowing scene of extreme Hungarian neuro-realism, and the heroine of a dizzying romantic thriller the next. And this compartmentalization, in a way, turns out to be part of the movie's subject. At one point Márta attends an event to celebrate the publication of a book that János has lessons written: a philosophical memoir about his experiences as a neurosurgeon and the

lessons he learned from his successes and failures. “The brain is like a city, with various neighborhoods,” he says during a Q&A. “They’re not all of the same value.”

That’s a fascinating insight into the extraordinary difficulty of their work and the keen discernment every delicate operation demands. Which of those neighborhoods can they sacrifice if they must? How far into this chamber or down this corridor can they go without causing the patient serious injury? Brilliantly, Horvát embeds these questions and implications in the visual and narrative architecture of her movie as a whole. The placement of rooms, entryways and windows takes on unusual significance; one of the script’s most important conversations takes place through a locked door. Even outside, obstacles remain; at one point, the two leads walk down opposite sides of the same street as though bound (and yet separated) by an invisible thread, in a scene that becomes a kind of remote, no-contact seduction.

Working with the cinematographer Róbert Maly (who shot the picture exquisitely on 35-millimeter film), Horvát sends Márta and János through the motions of a stop-and-go dance, establishing their boundaries even as she slowly collapses the distance between them. In doing so, she slyly turns the conventions of the film noir inside out. The filmmaker has noted some of her cinematic inspirations, including Alfred Hitchcock, François Truffaut and Krzysztof Kieślowski, with his twisty tales of crisscrossing journeys, fateful encounters and women on harrowing personal missions. In perhaps Horvát’s most salient reference point, she presents Márta as a coded riff on Madeleine Elster, reflecting János’ longings back at him in a feverish Eastern European “Vertigo.” (The striking use of green as a background color seals the connection.)

That connection lingers even as Márta sidesteps the usual trappings of the femme fatale, the woman who manipulates or is manipulated by a man’s desires. She’s entirely her own creation: smart and complicated, rational and eccentric, a woman who pursues human connection even as she cherishes her solitude. Rather than being trapped in a web of lies, she draws on her passions, emotional and intellectual, in pursuit of deeper truths — truths that might not actually be as strange, or unknowable, as they appear. ♦



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