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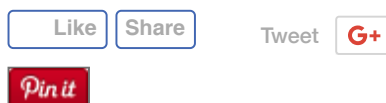
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Secrets in the Attic: UK icons Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay mesmerize in Andrew Haigh's '45 Years'

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Dec 21, 2015



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45 Years is a “small” film, so quiet it seems to unspool in a world remote from our accustomed ambient racket, and it’s toplined by two actors well over the age of 60. This is not a known formula for success. Yet *45 Years* looks poised to become the sleeper hit of the season when it opens via Sundance Selects on Dec. 23—certainly among cinephiles and the boomer crowd. Its star Charlotte Rampling has already garnered the prize for Best Actress from the Los Angeles Film

Critics and Boston Society of Film Critics, and may well snag a few more as we approach awards season. Her co-star, Tom Courtenay, matches her performance in subtlety and breadth.

But perhaps the deep satisfaction to be had from *45 Years* lies less in the star turns than the perfect meshing of brilliant 42-year-old director Andrew Haigh (*Weekend*, HBO’s “Looking”), his pair of Brit icons, and his own screenplay, which discloses perfectly placed revelations about the precarious nature of intimacy as the film builds toward its artfully ambiguous climax.

Based on the short story “In Another Country” by Brit writer/academic David Constantine, the plot follows Kate and Geoff Mercer (Rampling and Courtenay), whose marriage spins into crisis when Geoff receives the news that the body of his lover of 50 years ago, who died in a hiking accident, has been retrieved perfectly preserved from a glacier. The film is right in synch with topical issues: An overheating planet, likely, has sprung this revenant from her icy casing to haunt the Mercers’

marriage. You even could call *45 Years* a global-warming drama. But Haigh is primarily interested in couple dynamics. In the much-admired *Weekend*, he explored how a hookup of two gay men becomes more than just a one-night stand. In *45 Years*, he delves into the secrets couples reveal or conceal, the tiny events that can widen to devastating effect, and the messy emotions we carry around with us that we can't articulate.

Literate in the style of European filmmakers, in conversation Haigh is apt to toss in a quote from Kierkegaard, and he has surely read his James Joyce. The shivery power of Joyce's short story "The Dead" resonates throughout *45 Years*. Like that iconic story, *45 Years* dramatizes to stunning effect how a youthful passion—idealized and untested by time—possesses the power to rock the foundations of even a good marriage, with its disappointments, tedium and routines. I recently interviewed Haigh, who is charming and voluble and speaks in italics and is the sort of chap you'd choose to raise a Guinness with.

Film Journal International: The metaphor of the frozen body preserved in the glacier seems a bit unlikely, when you think about it. How do you get viewers to buy it?

Andrew Haigh: Yes, it is improbable. You think, It *can't* be true—then something in your brain goes, well, maybe it *could* be true. And then you forget, the metaphor is so nice. [Note: Constantine's story is based on a real incident.]

FJI: How did you expand Constantine's rather spare short story, and what sorts of changes did you make?

AH: I completely shifted the dynamics of the original story, which is told very much from the husband's perspective. It made sense to me to tell the story from the wife's perspective. To look at how the husband's existential crisis affects *her* seemed the less traveled road. So the point of view is very much Kate's.

FJI: I saw the film with a man who thought Kate overreacted. After all, Geoff had this relationship five years before he ever met his wife. How can she expect him not to have had a past?

AH: What I love about this film, it creates different conversations and arguments—and, yes, men do tend to feel she overreacted. People argue about it, including my own family—my aunt was fighting with my mum's other sister. A lot of people feel: Why is Geoff being so awful to his wife and not realizing her pain? It almost says more about the people watching than it tells about the film. People bring their own histories to it. Kate knows she's being irrational sometimes—but to me there's no overreaction because she's feeling it.

FJI: When Kate is impelled to dig around in Geoff's memorabilia in the attic, she makes a particularly devastating discovery—I'm trying to avoid a spoiler here—that plays like a second-act climax.

AH: Yes, that moment pushes the film onto a completely other level. But it's complicated, this is not just a story about a childless marriage. We don't even know *why* the Mercers don't have children—though we assume it was a joint decision.

FJI: *Did you ever think of fleshing out such a crucial decision from their backstory in a scene?*

AH: There was actually a scene where we expanded on it a little bit. Yet even when I shot it I felt, this is a film about knowing and not knowing, revealing and not revealing—and the scene pushed the film over into a different type of story. Even if Kate made the decision not to have children, the fact that there was something Geoff never told her—that would inform that decision—is enough of a betrayal. You come to regret everything, Kierkegaard said. The things you did do and even the things you didn't do. Once you make a decision, you can't help but wonder, what would have happened if I'd made a different decision? What would my life have become?

FJI: *You're 42. Were you ever concerned about your ability to address the dramas of people so much older?*

AH: I wondered at first: Do I have to get my head into what it must feel like to be that age? Then I figured that I probably didn't. I think fundamentally you don't change as much as you think. I suspect you're probably set when you're 20, there's a core thing that doesn't really change. When I wrote *45 Years*, I thought, okay, how am *I* going to feel in that situation? I have my own regrets and worries about the choices I've made and relationships that are complex.

FJI: *So much of film is about looking at beautiful faces and bodies. What made you buck that trend to make a film about older people? Was it hard to get funded?*

AH: Weirdly, it wasn't hard to get it funded. My previous film did well, and with this one they said: Okay, we'll give you the money. You don't stop questioning what your life is when you get to a certain age—in fact, as you get older and have less time on the planet, it makes sense that you'd be thinking about this even more. And Charlotte and Tom are very nice to look at. There's such a Western obsession with being young. I look at Tom and Charlotte's faces, and to me they're beautiful. Tom's 78, Charlotte in her late 60s—the same spirit is in those eyes—and their faces to me are incredible. So strange that anyone would think that just because you have some wrinkles you're not any longer beautiful.

FJI: *Charlotte carries a lot of the narrative just through the expressions on her face, almost like a silent-screen star. How did you direct her?*

AH: I don't like to over-direct an actor in terms of how they're feeling. I'm not very good when it comes to trying to articulate the emotion behind something. I want the actors to show *me* how they feel in the moment, and my job is to create an environment that allows them to do that. So I shoot very much in sequence as much as I can, so they know where they're going at any point—which helps dramatically. Charlotte is the master of showing a symphony of emotions on her face. Lots of actors can't do that.

FJI: The sex scene—or, rather, the fiasco it becomes—is fairly excruciating to watch. Was it hard to shoot?

AH: That scene was strangely easy. I've shot quite a lot of sex scenes in my life, and in sex scenes there must be a story point, so you learn something about the characters. And if there's a story, then it's just like any other scene, and the actors know that. [In this film] the scene is so pivotal because it's about two people trying to reconnect. If the sex had resulted in something more successful, they might have got over everything else and talked about things in a more open way. It's sad that so many little tiny turns in life have a ripple effect.

FJI: Weekend was made with two unknown actors. Was it hard to make the leap in 45 Years to working with two veterans of British film?

AH: Weirdly, it doesn't feel like a leap. I would have thought I'd be intimidated, but in the end, when you arrive on set with the camera, it doesn't matter who they are and how much money it's costing—you're focused only on getting something truthful. And in a strange way it didn't feel fundamentally different. My last film had a similar setup. One was about two gay men, this one is about an older man and woman—and it's still about exploring similar themes.

FJI: I was blown away by the veracity of the dialogue between Kate and Tom. How did you accomplish that?

AH: I was just trying always to be as honest and real as I possibly could be. And also to not always make sense. Actual dialogue is complicated, strange, messy; people say things they later regret. I listen a lot to people talking; so much is unsaid. We're not good as humans at communicating our feelings. In America you're encouraged to talk about your feelings and everyone does—but they're just surface feelings.

FJI: The ending is both joyous and catastrophic. How should we read it?

AH: That's a lovely way to put it. Because it's all of those things. By that time you realize that Kate cannot hide the enormity of how she's feeling. It's the moment when she falls through the ice. You don't know what's going to happen after the film ends. She might stay with him, or not—everyone has a different opinion—but you do know that it's never going to be the same. Because, in fact, something that was actually pretty good got broken by events from 50 years ago. That's what's so sad about it. That ending reflects the fragility of all of our relationships.

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