

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2023/24 SEASON**



**AFTERSUN**  
(Language: English)

Director: Charlotte Wells, 2022. Running time: 102 minutes  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 18 October 2023.

“Earlier this month, the debut feature from Scottish-born, New York-based writer-director Charlotte Wells picked up a whopping 16 nominations for the British Independent Film awards, an impressive haul second only to Saint Maud’s record-breaking performance in 2020. It’s easy to see why *Aftersun* has generated such excitement since premiering at Cannes in May. A brilliantly assured and stylistically adventurous work, this beautifully understated yet emotionally riveting coming-of-age drama picks apart themes of love and loss in a manner so dextrous as to seem almost accidental. Don’t be fooled; Wells knows exactly what she’s doing, and her storytelling is as precise as it is piercing.

We meet young, separated father Calum (*Normal People*’s Paul Mescal) and his 11-year-old daughter, Sophie (screen newcomer Frankie Corio), on holiday together in Turkey in the late 1990s. Sophie is smart for her age (she and Calum are sometimes mistaken for siblings) but she’s still also very much a child, torn between hanging out with the younger kids at the resort or with the more boisterous teenagers who lounge around the pool table. As for Calum, his outward calm seems to cover demons of denial; a trancey energy that threatens to break through the placid surface of his current life, dragging him back into a more chaotic – or euphoric – existence (*Moonlight* director and *Aftersun* co-producer Barry Jenkins describes Calum as “wading through wells of quiet anguish”).

Scrappy DV-cam footage offers apparently concrete evidence of the interactions between Sophie and Calum, with both roles being performed with quite breathtaking naturalism. Yet *Aftersun* is constructed as a very personal recollection, filtered through a haze of memory and imagination by the now-adult Sophie (Celia Rowleson-Hall) looking back on things she didn’t really understand at the time. That tension between fact and fiction – between recorded and remembered events – draws us deep into the drama, causing us to examine every frame as if searching for clues to a hidden truth that remains tantalisingly elusive. It often seems as if the real story is playing out beyond the edges of the frame, dancing in the shadows beyond the confines of the screen. Plaudits to editor Blair McClendon, who juxtaposes scenes and images in

almost hyperreal, dreamlike fashion, conjuring a magical space in which time seems to bend emotionally.

Appropriately for a work that is clearly profoundly personal, Wells says the roots of *Aftersun* lay in flipping through holiday albums of herself as a child and being struck by how young her father looked. Later, she came across a photo in which she was sitting by a pool in Spain, with “a very beautiful woman right behind me... and it made me wonder who the real subject of the picture was”. That sense of mystery runs throughout this mesmerising feature, which, despite being set largely in the past, nonetheless feels peculiarly present.

Some of the groundwork for *Aftersun* was laid in Wells’s 2015 short film *Tuesday* (she has called this “a sequel of sorts, in a different place and time”). There’s more than a hint of the tactility of Lynne Ramsay’s early works, with short films such as *Gasman* (1997) and features such as *Ratcatcher* (1999) clearly serving as inspirations. Just as Ramsay has an almost uncanny ability to capture the texture of memories on screen, so Wells showcases a Proustian talent for transporting the audience back into a world they didn’t actually experience, while making them *feel* like they did. There are also clear traces of the films of Margaret Tait in Wells’s craft, specifically *Blue Black Permanent* (1992), which seems to have served as a tonal reference (a volume of Tait’s writings is prominently displayed on screen).

Gregory Oke’s cinematography captures the colour of memory, with bright exteriors and glowing surfaces carefully graded by Kath Raisch to evoke vivid snapshots of fleeting moments. Composer Oliver Coates weaves his way in and out of the film’s emotional labyrinth, while deftly chosen needle drops (including a mashed-up vocal version of the Queen-David Bowie hit *Under Pressure*) put us right there in the moment.”

**Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, Sunday 20 November 2022.**

“Nothing much happens in *Aftersun*, but every moment matters. Divorced dad Calum (played by *Normal People*’s Paul Mescal) takes his daughter Sophie (newcomer Francesca Corio, so effortlessly cool she never seems to be acting) on a low-key holiday. Set sometime in the ’90s, they hang out in a budget Turkish resort, being easy-going, goofy and enjoying just the right amount of cheesy holiday fun (one hotel staff performance of the ‘Macarena’ will send shivers down the spine of anyone who’s had to behold it).

Calum is caring, weird in the way that everyone’s dad is a bit weird, and a

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goofball who genuinely enjoys spending time with his kid. But there's a clear sadness to him that Mescal allows to flicker through his face to remind us that no matter how hard Calum is trying, there's a dark side to him that will soon rear its head. He promises Sophie things he cannot afford, and she calls him out on it. Then one night, unable to handle things, he disappears into the night, leaving Sophie stranded alone. Although he does come back, his guilt is overwhelming.

Scottish filmmaker Charlotte Wells, who wrote and directs *Aftersun*, weaves together memories, home video and dreams in a singular way. It turns out that an older Sophie is remembering these important – and, it is implied, last – moments with her dad as an adult. Wells makes the interplay between these recollections and her piecing together her father's emotional reality incredibly vivid.

*Aftersun* flows like a fondly remembered memory that's been replayed endlessly, as if trying to find an important detail that might explain what happened. The easy pace of Wells's direction brings out the best in her central performers, and the chemistry between Mescal and Corio plays out effortlessly. The light moments between them are warm and the darker ones linger heavily. Throughout the film, we are seeing Calum through Sophie's memory of him, both loving and resentful, compassionate and angry. Later, child and adult Sophie watch her dad walk away down an airport corridor and disappear into a strobe-filled nightclub. It's a melancholy and perhaps imaginary goodbye that lingers long after the credits roll.”

**Anna Bogutskaya, *Time Out*, Sunday 22 May 2022.**

“With a surname like that, maybe a lot was going to be expected of this extraordinary first-time feature director. Charlotte Wells' delectable debut movie has floored audiences all over the world, beginning with its premiere this May in the Critics' Week at Cannes, which is where I first saw it. It is film about the overwhelming power of the past and its terrible, tragic inaccessibility; a film about a father-daughter relationship achieving a poignant new intimacy at the very moment it has to be relinquished. The title elegantly gestures at something understood only when it has receded into the past, when its heat has cooled, and when some balm is needed.

*Aftersun* features Paul Mescal and nine-year-old newcomer Frankie Corio as Calum and Sophie: a Scottish guy who, some time in the 90s, has come on a package holiday trip with his kid, from whose mum he is now separated. It's a summer trip in a budget resort, a sunshine break that is also a kind of farewell – although Sophie does not exactly grasp that. Maybe Calum doesn't either. Father and daughter amiably get along with no perceivable tension or drama. Calum good-naturedly goofs around with Sophie, who eye-rollingly tolerates his embarrassing dad-dancing at the disco. But one night Calum goes off on his own, stricken by a guilt and an overwhelming love that he can't properly show her.

Everything is low key and the film is allowed to unspool naturally, like a deceptively simple short story. It is structured in terms of a series of flashbacks experienced by the adult Sophie, and *Aftersun* is about childhood memories being worn to a sheen and elevated to mystery by being constantly replayed in your mind (like the digital video that Calum is shooting on his state-of-the-art Sony Handycam). New meanings appear that were not there at first, revealed or created by the remembering mind and endowed with a new poignancy.

Conversations about what *Aftersun* means have been intriguing: for some in the United States, the fact that Calum has three alcoholic drinks over supper with Sophie appears to hint at something irresponsible. Anglo-Saxon audiences might not see anything particularly bad in it. There is also the question of whether or not Calum is now supposed to be dead, a shocking implication (for a character who is so young in the movie) which makes the whole thing even more tragic.

Either way, the loss – and the love – together make up the one big thing overarching the film's many little moments that traffic uneventfully across the screen. Nothing very dramatic happens, and when something important does occur, it is coolly unemphasised and unsignposted. The artistry is implicit and unostentatious. The details accumulate; the images reverberate and the importance of the central relationship deepens. This film shimmers like a swimming pool of mystery, gaining new converts and followers everywhere it is shown. Nothing deserves the "film of the year" tag more than this."

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, Friday 23 December 2023.**

"The cast-iron reality of a Nineties summer package holiday, with its suntan lotion, cheap drinks and entertainment almost as tacky as the carpets meets something altogether more impressionistic in Charlotte Wells' debut film - a

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character study of both dad and daughter and the characteristics of the bond between the two.

Single dad Calum (Paul Mescal) has taken his 11-year-old daughter Sophie (Frankie Corio) on holiday to Turkey, but we soon see the surface excitement is underpinned by something much more serious for dad, even if his daughter only catches the occasional glimpse of it like sun - or, more accurately, shadow - hitting a wave. Although the bulk of the action unfolds under the hot Turkish sunshine, it is loosely framed by the older Sophie (Celia Rowson-Hall) looking back at a holiday video that was shot on the trip. There are also regular, darker, interludes filled with music, strobe and emotion - a sort of liminal world that seems cut adrift from time altogether, at once potentially the past and the future.

Like Sophie, we look for answers to the mystery of her dad, quickly becoming invested in his mental state. She quizzes him on the balcony, although he is reluctant to give any answers. We also see the moments she doesn't, despair in a bathroom, desire in a rug store, both of which run unexpectedly deep. For Sophie, the holiday emotions are to the fore, the thrill of getting to hang out with kids who are older, even the prospect of a first kiss, things she shares with her dad as though he's a co-conspirator. You can always tell me anything is his message to her, caught in tension with the fact he is, of course, given the relationship, unable to do the same in return.

Wells shows how interactions that were solid within their own moment become more ambiguous as time has gone by and the adult understanding of Sophie has grown. Her childhood reactions and interactions are now tempered by the wider awareness afforded by the passing of the years and, Wells hints, subsequent events. Mescal and Corio don't put a foot wrong on the acting front, their bond feeling both loose and tight in all the right places. Wells also goes beyond the emotional textures that run as deep as the pile on those rugs to other moments of sensorial elegance - smoke drifting upwards, the sound of breathing. Her film is not only ambitious but daring and unafraid - it's a powerful combination."

**Amber Wilkinson, *Eye for Film*, 14 September 2022.**