

Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time from Hungary: Love blurs the line between fantasy and reality

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Directed by Lili Horvát; written by Horvát.

The human brain may be the most sophisticated of nature's creations, and it is still imperfectly understood. It is the seat not only of reason, but also of emotion, both of which affect our judgment. Although its power of apprehension is immense, the brain is not free of bias and can be deceived.

Neurosurgeon Márta Víz (Natasa Stork) confronts these realities head on in *Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time* (2020), the official Hungarian submission in the international feature film category at the Academy Awards. At the beginning of the film, Márta is flying home to Budapest. She has quit her job at a hospital in New Jersey to pursue fellow neurosurgeon János Drexler (Viktor Bodó), whom she met by chance at a medical conference. Something about him captivated her, and when they spoke briefly at the coffee machine, they agreed to meet again.

Márta strides briskly to the Pest side of Liberty Bridge to meet János on the appointed day. The hour comes and goes, but János does not arrive. Márta walks to the nearby hospital where he works to try to find him. When she approaches him in the parking lot, he is surprised. He gently tells her that he has never seen her before and that she has mistaken him for someone else.

Márta is shaken, although she remains outwardly composed. Could she have made a mistake? Did she imagine the encounter with János? After he walks away, Márta collapses, and passers-by rush to her assistance.

This incident casts a shadow over everything Márta does afterward. The steely, gifted neurosurgeon begins making seemingly irrational decisions. She applies for a job at the unimpressive hospital where János works,

and her future supervisor tells her that she is crazy for having left New Jersey. She looks for a new home and, as if to punish herself, chooses a shabby apartment that needs a lot of renovation. Its bathroom window offers a view of the Liberty Bridge.

Márta cannot stop thinking about János. On the Internet, she finds photos of the conference she attended and zooms in, looking for his face. She watches an old video of János singing at a recital as a child. One night, she even follows him home in a taxi.

Although Márta excels at work and behaves appropriately, if coldly, in social situations, her focus on János borders on obsession. What could have predisposed her to such behavior? She tells her therapist that she is pushing 40 and has no children, implicitly expressing a desire to settle down. She confesses that she once wanted a relationship so badly that she mistook her fantasy for reality. But these scant details are all we learn about Márta and her past. Her fixation remains difficult to understand.

Because they work at the same hospital and live in the same city, Márta and János often see each other. As Márta prepares to operate on a patient, János enters the room to observe and, if necessary, assist. When the patient recovers, he and his family express their gratitude to Márta. The patient's son, who is some years younger than Márta, begins to court her clumsily.

The film's ambiguity about what is real and what Márta is imagining creates persistent tension. At times, the viewer may wonder about Márta's sanity. She begins to behave recklessly, and her friends tell her that they are "worried sick" about her.

The main actors contribute significantly to the movie's interest. Stork's performance is intense and

compelling. In public, her character betrays little emotion. She generally speaks and acts in a businesslike manner, keeping civilities to a bare minimum. When her character is alone, Stork conveys fear, satisfaction or doubt with the merest change of expression. Her luminous blue eyes penetrate and analyze, yet also reveal vulnerability. Her overall restraint makes her rare occasions of evident happiness or triumph that much more powerful.

Bodó treads a fine line in his portrayal of János. He seems to maintain a polite distance from Márta, but his glances and his bearing sometimes hint at romantic interest. With Márta, we watch him talk to people whose relationships with him we try to guess. But we learn no more about János and his past than we do about Márta and hers.

This engaging movie effectively creates ambiguity about the action without resorting to obtrusive devices. Through the characters' professions and, more explicitly, through their dialogue, the movie raises questions about how the brain functions and how thought arises. One sympathizes with Márta yet seeks to understand her. Her conscious embrace of reason and intuition, and her struggle to balance the two, is genuinely human.

Yet the film disappoints as well. When the tension dissipates toward the end, the film turns banal. A deeper disappointment is that this psychological movie, which portrays romantic fixation and the ambiguities of human interactions so well, offers, finally, little psychological insight into its characters.

Another, related problem is the movie's failure to examine the social environment that its characters inhabit. Certainly, the characters' thoughts and behavior reflect common human characteristics. But the movie does not examine how the characters' membership in the professional class shapes their outlook. Nor is the film's historical setting indicated or analyzed. With minor changes, the film could take place in any of the previous few decades.

Hungary is presently suffering under the authoritarian Orbán government, which is moving in the direction of open dictatorship. Thirty years after the collapse of the Stalinist regime and the restoration of capitalism, as the WSWs wrote in April 2020, "Hungarian workers are exploited by transnational corporations for starvation wages. Labour costs per hour, including additional non-

wage expenses, are less than one-third of the EU [European Union] average. The once well equipped health care system lies in ruins and will collapse in the coming days if the official number of coronavirus cases, which currently stands at just 500, increases." What are the consequences of entirely ignoring these broader realities?

Preparations... is an intriguing and suspenseful film supported by strong performances. Its subject matter, the mind and human relationships, is a rich field for exploration, but the film does not plumb it deeply. Although it is enjoyable and well made, the movie may not reward repeated viewings with new insights.



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