

No Future: People who have been severely damaged

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Andrew Irvine and Mark Smoot

No Future, as its title suggests, is a grim work. It concerns the painful impact of drug addiction and related matters on the addicted, their families and others. Whether it fully intends to or not, the film suggests more generally the intolerable character of life in America for many people.

Over 93,000 people died in the US from drug overdoses in 2020, a horrifying 30 percent increase over the previous year. How many tens of thousands of others were harmed? In 1988, there were some 8,000 overdose deaths. It would be difficult to argue that such a surge has not been created by widespread and punishing social circumstances and the psychological states they help produce. The lack of hope in certain layers in the US is a problem that needs to be confronted.

Shot in Fort Worth, Texas prior to the pandemic, *No Future* centers on Will (British actor Charlie Heaton) and Claire (Catherine Keener), the mother of his friend and former bandmate Chris (Jefferson White).

In the film's opening scene, at a recovering addicts' group meeting, Will explains hopefully, "I've met someone. I can see a future with her." That someone is his girlfriend, Becca (Rose Salazar), a nursing assistant. They are on the verge of living together.

However, the past continues to cast a shadow. The same evening, Chris—who has been in prison, presumably for something related to his ongoing drug problem—visits Will, congratulating him on being "clean." Chris expresses doubts as to whether there is "a place in this world" for him, "an addict, a convicted felon." He goes on, "I don't know if I can do this." Chris wants things to return to the way "they used to be," when the two played music together. Will brushes this off, "I can't help you."

A few hours later, Chris dies from a drug overdose at home, with Claire in the next room. We are not led to believe that it was accidental.

Claire and Will are both grief-stricken. Each blames him or herself. (Moreover, Will has the fact that he was not there—because of his drug problems—when his mother died of cancer on his conscience.) They eventually spend a night together. Will fails to tell her that Chris visited him the fateful night and that he essentially pushed her son away. When that fact comes out, Claire considers it a great betrayal. His brief affair with Claire, inevitably, injures his relationship with Becca. *No Future* ends on a bleak note.

The film, co-directed by Andrew Irvine and Mark Smoot, is a subdued affair. The music, the colors, the performances all contribute to that. There are moving and effective moments. As noted above, *No Future* exudes a genuine painfulness, the sensation of human beings being ground quietly, relentlessly between millstones. The characters come and go, drive across town, show up to work, eat meals, but the life has gone out of them to a considerable extent.

The writer-directors have not simply dreamed up the air of resignation that predominates here. There are very damaged people in the US, and elsewhere. Will's final words to Claire are "Some people can't be fixed." He is referring to her son, but he may be thinking of himself as well.

The atmosphere is serious, but only to a limited extent. The development of characters and events in *No Future* remains largely on the surface. In an early scene, Chris dismisses one of Will's comments about taking sobriety "one day at a time" as a "platitude," which indeed it is. Because of its social timidity, the filmmakers are forced back on their own "platitudes" more than once. "I enabled him," "You were there for him," "You're the only thing that keeps me from using," "You're blaming yourself for what happened to Chris," "I'm scared that if you knew the real me, you'd leave and not come back," "You're in denial."

Even taking into account that *No Future* was filmed

before the pandemic, which has only deepened and worsened every social affliction, the sharp rise in the overdose figures already spoke to terrible popular distress prior to 2020. By 2019, the number of drug overdose deaths had more than quadrupled since 1999. How is it possible to approach this as a purely individual problem? Meanwhile, for its part, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has increased four-fold since 1998 (from an average closing price that year of 8,630.76 to 35,677.02 on October 20, 2021). The malignant growth of social inequality and the rise of parasite-billionaires who have looted the economy help explain the indices of social misery, including the figures on drug use, suicide and homicide, and the overall decline in life expectancy.

In their public comments, the filmmakers present their work in an unnecessarily narrow manner. Mark Smoot explains that “it is a personal film. We were going through some difficult times there for a while, and this story was our way of working through those times. Through loss, grief, depression. ... It feels good to have something so positive come out of those times.” At the same time, Smoot expresses the commendable desire “to put something out there in the world that creates some kind of empathy and understanding and compassion, the forgiveness of self and others. The world could probably use more of that.”

The film’s title raises questions. Class society mutilates certain people severely, even irreparably. But even in the face of the most pressing, unprecedented difficulties, that does not speak to the general human response or condition. The same processes, with their roots in economic exploitation, that have led to the tragic deaths each year of tens of thousands in the overdose crisis, are angering, awakening and radicalizing tens of millions. They will seek other means of dealing with their burdens. The artists need to begin to be aware of this.



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