

45 Years

In “45 Years,” Charlotte Rampling presents a screen persona that probably will be too little seen but should be relished by any moviegoer looking for superior displays of acting. For this role she has already been recognized with a nomination as Best Actress in a Leading Role by the American Academy for her touching, slow burn performance.

This film constitutes both a moving chamber piece and an advance acting class by two long-time English stars, Rampling and Tom Courtenay as the Mercers, Kate and Geoff, an older British couple poised to celebrate their 45 years of steadfast and uneventful marriage.

Kate Mercer and her husband Geoff had to cancel the party marking their 40th wedding anniversary when Geoff underwent bypass surgery. Now there is only a week before the couple, comfortable and childless, will mark their 45-year anniversary in a posh setting in their town in Norfolk in the northeast corner of England.

The mundane preparations for the event are overthrown when shattering news arrives for Geoff from Swiss authorities, reporting that the perfectly preserved body of an old girlfriend has been found in an Alpine crevasse where they were on vacation 50 years before. This is a piece of Geoff’s past of which Kate is only vaguely aware, and the news tests their union and leads her to question their relationship. Her doubts are multiplied when she discovers a cache of unknown slides that Geoff has hidden in the attic. As she goes through the motions of the party preparation, Kate wonders whether she can go through with the celebration.

There is nothing flashy here. As the days tick down, everything moves at its appropriate, measured pace, and the pastoral countryside and small town settings are delicately evoked by writer-director Andrew Haigh, but the superb Brit-style understatement of gesture, visage, and tone evokes veiled motivations longing to surface, especially in Kate.

Charlotte Rampling (now almost 70) claims an acting career of 50 years, making her first splash in “Georgy Girl” in 1966 at 20, and she has appeared in more than 100 productions over that span. For many of those roles, she personified a slightly mysterious, sometimes nefarious beauty who smoldered through roles (see “The Verdict” from 1982) in mostly British and French films, a woman of trim body, luxurious hair, and seductive eyes. Now we have an older Rampling, but just as beautiful as a mature wife, trying to figure out whether her tranquil life might go off the rails. In the final party scene, the build-up to the couple’s celebration is outwardly jolly yet full of tension, and Kate’s final look of distress at its end is shattering.

Tom Courtenay complements Rampling’s performance superbly, playing a mildly addled, liberal-minded good old boy, labor activist, and head of the local soccer team’s booster club. Since his dedicated wife has clearly taken the lead in their marriage, you can see Geoff fighting against the trend, wandering a bit and acting out at times like a little boy, getting nicely drunk at the big feté. Courtenay handles all of these traits with quiet skill mingled with panache.

The pair last year both won Best Acting awards at the Berlin Festival for their stellar work in this film. The prizes were well deserved.
(*The film is 95 min. and is rated "R" for mature themes.*)

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