

Historical Drama is Fortified by Technique in 'Sunset'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 1, 2019 - 12:13pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – History is made when you’re often busy making other plans. That is ardently illustrated in “Sunset,” a drama set early in the second decade of the 20th Century in the on-the-brink-of-revolution capital of Budapest, Hungary. A retail store is the town’s centerpiece, plus there is a mysterious woman associated with that store, until she isn’t.

Juli Jakab portrays the woman, and she single handedly (practically) brings this history to life. The camera focuses on Jakab in a series of episodic vignettes amid the edgy and anarchy-ridden streets of the city, giving the film a sense of confinement from everything going on around her. That is part of the remarkable nature of this film ... while the eye of the action is on the woman, squeezed around her in the frame are the events of that moment. This may be as simple as a team of horse thundering by, or as pompous and stately as her majesty the queen. What floats is a foreboding sense of impending doom, but for the most part it holds off, until the powder keg of anarchy can’t help but explode. Add a dash of soap opera and symbolic anti-feminism, and director Laszlo Nemes (“Son of Saul”) has accomplished his creative mission.

The city of Budapest is thriving in 1910, in many ways outdoing its rival Vienna in the “belle epoch” days before the Great War. Irisz Leiter (Juli Jakab) has arrived, claiming to be the daughter of the former owners of Leiter’s Hat Store. Her arrival is seemingly foretold, because store manager Oszkar Brill (Vlad Ivanov) is compliant with her will to join the hat-making (milliner) crew.



Juli Jakab as Irisz Leiter in 'Sunset'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

As she is settling in, a man tips her off that her brother may still be alive, sending Irisz on a frantic search. The trail leads to an anarchist's nest, and the potential overthrow of the Hungarian monarchy involves the lost brother. Dividing her time between the store and the search makes a tense situation seem hopeless, until that hopelessness spills into the streets like rain into a gutter.

As he did with "Son of Saul," director Nemes uses a close-subject technique, as the point of view focuses on the main character of Irisz. The actress Juli Jakab has a haunting presence within the technique, and her look is part of the mood in the film. Unlike "Son of Saul," the POV is looser ... the action around Irisz is more distinguishable than in Saul. The remarkable nature of this cinematic storytelling enhances history, and the expression is personal. Again, it happens when we're busy making other plans.

The film's retail setting harkens back to an old American studio system film called "The Shop Around the Corner" (1940, directed by Ernst Lubitsch), also set in Budapest and a retail store, as well as involving a female worker. Its lightness contrasts to the darker world of "Sunset," and provides a comparative source to how fortifying a story becomes when it sits closer to the fire of truth and authenticity. While not as brutal as "Son of Saul" (a Holocaust story), "Sunset" creates a time and place that feels real.



Arrival: Irisz Leiter in a Budapest in the Midst of 'Sunset'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

The POV technique also accomplishes a claustrophobia that can be distracting at times. The complexity of the story needs sharp attention, as characters swirl around Irisz like bugs to a light. Having done this style of cinema for two films in a row, director Nemes may want to try a more conventional structure, because in both cases the communicated themes get muddled in the midst of the swirl of Irisz's running about Budapest.

Last year was the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One (AKA the Great War) and the conflicts of those times are emerging yet again. As generations pass away, the old curse of "those who forget history are condemned to repeat it" becomes more obvious in an era of unlimited information with no filters. And involved in that curse are the circumstances of time and place, and our own running about.

"Sunset" opened in Chicago on March 29th, part of a nationwide release. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Juli Jakabl, Vlad Ivanov, Evelin Dobos, Susanne Wuest and Christian Harting. Written by Laszlo Nemes, Clara Royer and Matthieu Taponier. Directed by Laszlo Nemes. Rated "R"



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