

Acropolis Cinema
presents:



May 15 - 21, 2020 – Acropolis Virtual Cinema

ABOUT THE FILM

Mara and Jo, in their twenties, have been close friends since middle school. Jo, the more outgoing figure, is a social worker who runs through a series of brief but intense relationships. Mara, a less splashy personality than Jo, bounces among teacher aide jobs while trying to land a position in elementary education, and writes fiction in her spare time. She too has a transient romantic life, though she seems to settle down after meeting Adam, a mild-mannered software developer. It soon becomes apparent that Jo, despite her intellectual gifts, is unreliable in her professional life, losing and acquiring jobs at a troubling rate. Substance abuse may be responsible for Jo's instability... but some observers suspect a deeper problem. Over the course of a decade, the more stable Mara sometimes tries to help, sometimes backs away to preserve herself, but never leaves behind her powerful childhood connection with Jo.

94 min. | U.S.A. | 2019

Fourteen by Richard Brody

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The writer and director Dan Sallitt seems to have filmed his new drama, “Fourteen”—which will be released digitally on Friday, on Grasshopper Film—in a state of heightened perception, and watching it puts the viewer into a similar state. It’s one of the rare movies in which alertness and creation converge—in which the complex emotional flow of daily life is teased out of its hiding place within ordinary and familiar social codes. Without any religious sentiment or spiritual haze, Sallitt converts his deceptively calm melodrama into an exaltation, and he builds an intricate array of textures and tones into a volcano of passion.

The film has a classic setup: two dear friends, both women around thirty, with fault lines between them that have built up tension over decades and are threatening to give way. It’s set in gentrified Brooklyn, amid an educated but nonetheless precarious young middle class. Mara (Tallie Medel) is stretched thin—working as a teacher’s aide in a classroom of young children, writing fiction, pursuing a master’s degree to advance her teaching career. Her lifelong friend, Jo (Norma Kuhling), lives not too far away. Jo is a social worker, devoted to her clients and filled with ideas about the practice, but she’s also a whirlwind of anarchic energy: she can’t get up in the morning, she blows off meetings, she doesn’t file paperwork. (She may also have a substance-abuse problem, though Mara’s suspicions on the subject prove tough to confirm.) Mara, by contrast, is organized, detail-oriented, responsible; Jo gets into trouble, and, when she does, it’s Mara whom she calls to straighten things out.

Neither woman has an easy time with romantic relationships. Sallitt keenly unfolds the inevitable and ambiguous overlaps of work and love, as when, in a sequence at the beginning of the film, Mara is preparing to go out to dinner with a guy whom she met through a Rube Goldberg-esque series of connections. In a brilliant scene of anticipation, Mara and Jo unpack the guy's mixed motives and possible deceptions, standing side by side in front of a blank wall made Abstract Expressionist by a climbing vine. Their poses and gestures and glances and the intensity of their talk converge to render the flat and tableau-like space in high sculptural relief. (Moreover, at the dinner, the guy reverses the equation and turns the spotlight on the two women's friendship.) As both friends push ahead and fall back in their work and love lives, their long-stifled conflicts come to the fore.

Sallitt's dialogue has a richness, a variety, an impulsive energy that captures overlapping and crisscrossing relationships, analyses, feints, tests, desires, deceptions, and loyalties. The way his characters talk, abruptly and searchingly, about serious things—about money and sex, work and family, friendship and domesticity, personal histories and grand ambitions—conveys, with humor and emotion, the large stakes at risk in their every interaction. The density of experience packed into plain scenes of people talking in familiar places and ways suggests the broad span of Sallitt's only seemingly modest cinematic ambition. What's more, the actors capture this all-encompassing spirit—especially Medel and Kuhling, whose poised and thoughtful performances, in scenes together and apart, convey a quietly overwhelming sense of grand designs.

The vast vision that "Fourteen" offers is hinted at in its title—it refers to an age, one at which Mara and Jo were already best friends. With its focus on time and the changes that it brings, "Fourteen" is also a minefield of spoilers that I'm grateful not to have known in advance. It's a movie in which end credits are essential (and Sallitt delivers them with a serenely inventive splendor), because even knowing the cast of characters in advance gives away too much.

The credits reveal that Sallitt is not only the writer and director of the film but also its editor. The editing of "Fourteen" is inseparable from its script and its images—is an essential aspect of the drama. "Fourteen" happens to be one of the best-edited films I've ever seen. There isn't a single rapid-montage sequence in the movie; Sallitt captures the speed of physical action without miming it in editing. Rather, he uses editing to convey the flow of time in both shockingly simple and audacious ways. In effect, he transforms the entire hour-and-a-half-long feature into one long montage sequence, which is all the more daring for how it maintains a strict chronological order. Even as the movie unfolds extended scenes in ample detail, it leaps joltingly ahead from episode to episode, creating an extraordinary sense of time rushing by, with thrilling yet harrowing urgency.

The very subject of "Fourteen" is seizing the day—and attempting to define what that exhortation means. The pace at which the drama unfolds—both gradually and in leaps—is the very core of the film's subject: the dangers that await when opportunities and connections are missed, when remedies aren't sought, when action is deferred, and, by

contrast, the possibilities that arise when time is parsed, action is organized, general emotions and problems analyzed in detail. It's a drama about looming chaos, about the abyss that threatens to swallow up great ideas and noble intentions and vital personalities—and about the relentless effort that's required to keep anything like a life together. What's more, it forges that idea into both an aesthetic and an ethic—it's a drama of the physical and emotional labor that, in composing a life and gracing the lives of others, is itself a virtuous beauty. Sallitt's keenly restrained style shares in this very idea; built of a concentrated and focussed observational ardor, it transcends the conventional form of independent-film realism to realize a philosophical, personal cinema that seems created, fresh and whole, from start to finish.



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