

least, a little unsettling — as it ought to be — and it places its lead characters' dynamic on a knife's edge. The kind of vulnerable connection the duo shares ought to be terrifying for people who seem most comfortable walled off from others, and themselves. For better or worse, it might be the closest thing either of them has to true love. ♦



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ABOUT THE FILM

When Mara (Deragh Campbell), a young creative writing professor, reunites with Matt (Matt Johnson), a charismatic, free-spirited author from her past, a chance encounter threatens to spin her life in a thrilling new direction. Bonded by their history and shared interests, the two grow closer, while Mara contends with her strained marriage to an experimental musician. When her husband unexpectedly cancels plans to drive Mara to a conference out of town, Matt accompanies her instead and the pressure in their undefined relationship slowly builds.

Following the acclaimed *Anne at 13,000 Ft.*, *Matt and Mara* is the latest collaboration between director Kazik Radwanski (*How Heavy This Hammer*) and actress Deragh Campbell (*MS Slavic 7*). Official selection: Berlinale, Jeonju, TIFF.

TRT: 80 min

In person: Kazik Radwanski and Deragh Campbell

Matt and Mara by Siddhant Adlakha

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The most surprising thing about “Matt and Mara” — Kazik Radwanski’s sharply engaging indie drama about former sweethearts reconnecting — is how chaotic it feels, despite its understated tone. This starts with how quickly it flings you into its premise, disorienting you right alongside married creative professor teacher Mara Walsh (Deragh Campbell) when a man from her past, the quick-witted novelist Matt Johnson (Matt Johnson), pops up out of nowhere to say hi right outside her classroom, just a few seconds into the runtime.

The movie’s broad strokes resemble Celine Song’s Oscar-nominated immigrant drama “Past Lives,” which, while masterful, left some viewers wanting a version of that film where its lovelorn leads actually get together, or at least move in that direction. They’re wrong, but have nonetheless been rewarded, as “Matt and Mara” scratches that particular itch. However, Radwanski’s Toronto-set story isn’t quite a linear, didactic affair drama either, but rather, uses its characters as points of rumination on the present, and its fragile nature, embodied by two people with a complicated past and, most likely, no real future.

The screenplay tethers its narrative point of view not just to Mara, but to this sense of the now — to the current moment in the characters’ lives — though it by no means lacks a sense of history. In fact, the opposite is true: Campbell and Johnson write entire biographies for their characters through casual dialogue exchanges alone, even though few of these moments center on reminiscing and revealing specific details about their past. The when, where, and why of their past relationship (or really, if they even had one) is never discussed in detail, but their interpersonal dynamic reveals more about them than any exposition could.

Some of the film is a walk-and-talk around Toronto as they catch up. Matt now lives in New

York, but is visiting for a few weeks, and is quick to jump into wry observations, philosophical talking points, and even fun little public games, like trying to get strangers to smile at them. Mara, though initially more withdrawn, eventually gives in to his charms, even though Matt isn’t exactly a typical leading man. He has messy, boyish hair and an immature demeanor, but there’s something quietly confident about his brash antics — something commanding about his juvenile energy, especially as it contrasts with Mara’s reserve.

Mara, now the mother of a toddler, is married to a musician, Samir (Mounir Al Shami), though she inexplicably doesn’t seem to enjoy music. They’re an odd pairing that feels contrived for the sake of conflict, but Radwanski mostly uses this symbolic disconnect to emphasize just how little the young couple seems to introspect or talk through any moment of malaise. Their marriage seems, on the surface, fine, but nothing more. They chat, and greet each other, and cook together, but they also seem to talk past one another without realizing.

Radwanski’s blocking also goes a long way towards unearthing this dynamic, and establishing a contrasting one between its title characters. While Mara and Samir share the same physical space, there seems to be a nagging emotional distance between them, albeit one Mara might not be able to put words to, or even recognize. In some scenes, their eyelines don’t seem to meet. She and Matt, on the other hand, feel as though they belong in the same space — as though they’re part of the same picture — be it the fleeting moments during which their paths overlap on the sidewalk, nearly bumping shoulders and briefly forming an “M” shape, or simply the comfortable, overlapping rhythms with which their conversations flow.

Despite the sheer amount of aesthetic intention, so much of “Matt and Mara” comes down to its conversational nature, and its verité approach to capturing comedy and drama. Both its dialogue and visual framing feel entirely improvised, thanks in large part to the camera following the energies of its lead actors, both darlings of the Canadian indie scene. Campbell — for my money, the best working actress in North America not named Meryl Streep — finds herself effortlessly at ease within Mara’s discomfort. The character doesn’t seem quite sure of how to conduct herself, as though each new chunk of time spent with Matt (a drink, an errand, and eventually a road trip) presents new and terrifying possibilities that, in turn, force her to finally reflect on her marriage. All the while, Campbell imbues each syllable with a sense of deep thought and consideration, as though Mara were constantly questioning her worst physical and emotional impulses, but submitting to them regardless.

Johnson — who, by the way, directed the intense tech biopic “Blackberry” — is similarly comfortable in his skin (It’s no wonder he’s played a guy named Matt Johnson in four different movies, and a John Matheson in a fifth). However, Johnson’s specific naturalism also feels supercharged in this instance. Matt is an almost hyperactive character, albeit within the confines of the movie’s low-key drama, and he seems to enjoy being controversial. However, his provocations harbor hints of adolescent insecurity, which makes his insistence on presenting himself as both highly confident and highly self-aware seem all the more intriguing. Mara might be the one person who truly knows him, and though he rejects her playful, truth-laced banter about the way he masks his insecurities (and subconsciously social climbs in public settings), he can’t help but feel like he’s on the verge of admitting these faults with a cheeky smile, as though he’s happy she knows the worst parts of him.

This is, perhaps, what is most romantic about “Matt and Mara,” even though it inevitably leads to jealousy, and fishing for petty arguments in order to throw off more pressing or overarching concerns. The idea of two people knowing each other to this degree is, at the very