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Encounters

DERAGH CAMPBELL
MATT JOHNSON

Matt and Mara

a film by KAZIK RADWANSKI

MDFF

Medium Density Fibreboard Films presents



DERAGH CAMPBELL

MATT JOHNSON

Matt and Mara

PRODUCER / SALES

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MDFF

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LOGLINE

Mara, a young creative writing professor dealing with a strained marriage, reunites with Matt, a charismatic, free-spirited author from her past. But as their mutual connection grows, pressure also mounts against their close, but undefined, relationship.

SYNOPSIS

A chance encounter leads Mara (Deragh Campbell), a young creative writing professor, to reunite with Matt (Matt Johnson), a charismatic, free-spirited author from her past who wanders onto her university campus. Bonded by their shared interests, the two begin to grow closer as she contends with her strained marriage to an experimental musician. When her husband suddenly cancels plans to drive Mara to a conference out of town, Matt accompanies her on the road trip, where pressure slowly mounts against their undefined relationship.



KAZIK RADWANSKI, DERAGH CAMPBELL *and* MATT JOHNSON *in conversation with* ADAM NAYMAN

Adam Nayman: In *MATT AND MARA* you have cast both Deragh Campbell and Matt Johnson again. Is there a close relationship for you between *ANNE AT 13,000 FT* and this movie?

Kazik Radwanski: I would say creatively there's a connection between the two films. *ANNE AT 13,000 FT* was a new collaboration for me. I remember all the way back to *HOW HEAVY THIS HAMMER*, Deragh and I were talking about collaborating. So *ANNE AT 13,000 FT* felt like a really new process. Talking about the script with Deragh and being unsure how to find my footing, or how to find the character. I kept second-guessing myself. So I was a lot more confident on *MATT AND MARA* and was just feeling more open and eager to write something for Deragh and Matt after *ANNE AT 13,000 FT*.

I wouldn't have been able to write or think of this new film if we hadn't had that process. I wouldn't have thought it would be a good idea to put Matt and Deragh on screen together, to be honest. But I think whenever we shot with them, or had a scene with them, it definitely felt like there's more here I want. There are of course a lot of other reasons, but I think most immediately, a lot happens when Matt and Deragh are in the same scene for me. There's a lot to work with and it felt like we had just sort of discovered it on *ANNE AT 13,000 FT* and I was eager to do more with them.

Deragh Campbell: For me, with the characters being really different from *ANNE AT 13,000 FT*, it felt more like a deeper commitment to the process. On *ANNE AT 13,000 FT* we shot for a long time, and I didn't completely know how the character would come together. And then when I saw it, I felt like I saw the character for the first time. I was like, "Oh, yes, that's who I knew she was." So I think I went into this next project with a lot of trust in the process of a character being built through a kind of accumulative process. It was almost like the process was formalized and committed.

Adam Nayman: How do you approach building the characters and script together with the Actors?

Kazik Radwanski: Sometimes there's a script. Sometimes there isn't. A lot of the dialogue for Matt very clearly comes from Matt, where he's tapping into his schtick. It's similar with Deragh too. Each of them contributed dialogue unique to them. In terms of the shape of the film, I think that comes from conflict. That's the main way I designed the film. In the writing process, in the development process, it's imagining these conflicts. On set, it's workshopping them. And then in the edit, it's removing them or re-shaping them.

The conflicts were already consistently there on this film. The emotional affair, this underlying tension. But a lot of things would be created, or I would sort of impose something on Matt or Deragh. For instance, while we were working on the film, it slowly just occurred to me that we needed something for Matt's 'story'. So the idea of his father being ill was something that emerged after the first few rehearsals. So again, I think the process is that I introduce the conflict and then workshop with Matt and Deragh on how to resolve it.

Another inspiration on this movie, is how Matt and Deragh collide with each other on screen. How they're sort of opposites in a lot of ways, but that there is this undeniable chemistry or charisma, or whatever you want to call it.

Deragh Campbell: I felt Matt gave me the space to play with him. He consented to the relationship that was established between the characters. He consented to the idea that he liked my character. He was interested in my character in that way, and so he was kind of bound by that. But one of the things that I found so fun throughout the process is that you establish these rules. Kaz and I talked pretty early on, about how I was interested in playing a person that didn't know themselves. A person that didn't know their desires or didn't analyze their desires. She would just be like, "I'm gonna go just spend all my time walking around with this person that I used to be friends with, even though I can't totally get along with them".

I think Matt wanted it to be much more like they're in love and he wouldn't keep doing this if he didn't think that there wasn't the possibility of being together. I think it's much more cat and mouse than that-- or perhaps not cat and mouse, cat and cat! I think there is something like a chase, but neither person actually wants the capture. Because the actual being together would be hell. It would be terrible.

Matt Johnson: I always viewed my role in Kaz's films as the guy that has to get things going, as the kind of person who's bringing up the unmentionable, who is saying the verboten. Who is pushing Deragh in ways that she wasn't expecting. I'm not sure if Kaz gave a perspective on this, but I think at a certain level he appreciates it, because if there's one thing Kaz is amazing at on set, it's that he has a kind of almost timidity when the scene gets too naughty or too crazy or too funny. I feel his presence. I feel him watching it, and so I like to do things that put the scenes in a new place, because he's a master at setting the table, and then I feel as though it's my job to to pull the curtain, to pull the tablecloth out.

I feel that in both of these films now I've just been flirting with Deragh and trying to let her know how special she is to me, how much I like her. And she, I mean, I don't want to put words in your mouth there, but it's almost like you're resisting the message like you play these characters who are almost like, "Well you couldn't be flirting with me. You're just being ridiculous." I think in MATT AND MARA in particular, these feelings come to an apex, especially in that car scene when we're driving away from the writers conference. But I love the counter-play of the flirting, and then the retreat, and the flirting and the retreat. It's just something, for whatever reason Deragh and I fall into in a way that seems, at least to me, totally effortless.

Deragh Campbell: One of the things I find the funniest looking back on the film is how you and I could never agree on what their relationship was. Like when we would try and discuss why they were doing this, it seems sometimes we try to come together in understanding it. And then we would lose it again. We'd have these conversations where you'd say, "Well why would he be continuing to talk to her if there was absolutely no possibility of attaining her?" Whereas I felt that's exactly why he's doing it, because there is no actual threat of it ever actually happening, because they're willing to keep it in this suspended place forever, which is a kind of like...

Matt Johnson: Never growing up, never having a real life. Mara thinks she's in this rarefied spot where she can have this platonic, semi-platonic affair with a guy who is really igniting a lot of parts of her, while at the same time maintaining her marriage and totally not breaking the rules. Her husband would still be fine. I remember I would ask the question that I wish was in the dialogue of the film, "Does your husband know that you're coming out to see me this often?" And I always felt like Matt thought he had a chance. I always felt like Matt was like a dumb romantic who believed in true love and believed that he was going win in the end, and Mara had all kinds of intellectual professorial answers as to why this was a totally legitimate 21st century relationship. And you can have these types of platonic male-female, almost transactional relationships, with absolutely no sex and no real feelings. And I just didn't buy that. I didn't buy it for one second, even at the end of the film. I'm still feeling like Matt knows they're gonna be together, even if that is doomed, I think he will go to his grave thinking, "Well, me and Mara are going to get married."

Deragh Campbell: You really believe that? That's quite sweet.

Matt Johnson: I believe that deeply. Well, look it doesn't matter if I believe it or not, that's what was in my heart as I was shooting the film. So my belief, you know, post-shooting, is irrelevant. What's going to be interesting is what the audience thinks.

Kazik Radwanski: It's how Matt Johnson, the character in the movie, felt. Not how Matt Johnson in real life felt.

Matt Johnson: Exactly.

Adam Nayman: The film understands something so true and so sad and melancholy, which is, you will never have that feeling you had when you met people who were your friends, not just because they lived in the same school district, but because you're interested in the same things. Whether that's high school, or whether that's university, right?

Matt Johnson: I'll say that every single piece of work I've ever been involved in I'm always playing the same role, which is, I am always playing the imaginary childhood friend, beckoning the protagonist to return to their childhood. And I mean this is my archetype, and I've played it in all my films, all my movies are about this. BLACKBERRY is about this, MATT AND MARA. What I am trying to do is remind Mara of the child inside. And I'm doing that by playing a kind of DROP DEAD FRED

imaginary friend — like I don't exist. I don't exist to anybody else in the film, right? I am there for her, and I'm there to remind her of a kind of artistic potency that she had.

Adam Nayman: Is the movie a comedy? Would you describe it as a comedy?

Matt Johnson: People ask me if my movies are comedies and I say no. So I would say no for sure, because to me, this is a real world, completely grounded drama, where one of the characters wants to make the other one laugh. Does that make it a comedy? No, I think that that's in some ways almost an absurd classification. Because in the arc, like the Hollywood sense, a comedy is a movie where every single bit is just like: laugh, laugh, laugh-- like the goal is to make the audience laugh. I certainly wasn't playing it that way at all.

Deragh Campbell: I wasn't playing it for laughs. I don't know how to do that. But the way that I think of it as being a comedy is the absurdity of the task or situation. That they're chasing each other without the desire to catch, and the evasion, and the absurdity of that.

Kazik Radwanski: Yeah, I would say laughter is a response. But don't know if that makes it a comedy. But I think for a lot of scenes, as Matt mentioned, while on set I like to find those moments that feel uncomfortable, or confusing, or awkward social interactions that might lead to laughter. But yeah, I guess broadly speaking, what is a comedy? I think if we're talking about genre or what section of a video store? Out of all my films this is probably the closest to it.

Adam Nayman: I thought of Maren Ade during this film.

Kazik Radwanski: Her first feature was a huge inspiration on TOWER.

Adam Nayman: Yeah, THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

Kazik Radwanski: Yeah, Maren Ade has been an inspiration for a while, or someone I've always admired. So there's probably something to that comparison for sure. Obviously, Rohmer is a huge influence on MATT AND MARA and in general. I think of Rohmer, especially regarding these sort of relationship movies. And in the film, there's even a concrete reference to LOVE IN THE AFTERNOON, with that sweater shot of Deragh in the bedroom. So at a certain point, there's almost something exciting about paying homage to a filmmaker like that in a very Toronto setting amongst friends.

Deragh Campbell: yeah, like how romantic Rohmer's characters are without being particularly driven to directly achieve their goals. Like they want their goals to be achieved romantically...

Matt Johnson: And they're not melodramatic at all.

Deragh Campbell: No. It's like in THE GREEN RAY where you're talking about a character that

wants something but doesn't know what it is, but they are also determined to continue to look for it. And they'll only know it when they see it. And there is a bit of that in Mara. She knows she wants something out of Matt but she doesn't even actually completely know how to articulate it to herself, like, there's some idea about a way of being, or like a kind of person she could be, or something that she seeks through their relationships.

Adam Nayman: Can you tell us about the integration of children into a film or working with children. The domestic half of this movie, it's a defining aspect of Mara—in fact, in some ways the relationship with the daughter, and the relationship with the husband are seen in equal ways.

Kazik Radwanski: I think working with children is challenging. But it's something I like, and I think there's something straightforward about it in a weird way. They're not jaded, you know? The egos are a bit more straightforward. So in terms of this film-- it's difficult raising a child. Home life is difficult, but you're not really going to blame the child. And I think that's how I like to find tensions. With children, I think it's pretty understandable or easy to empathize with, a child screaming or crying, of it being worth it, or it being, you know, difficult, but ultimately a good thing. And I think that's what I wanted in this film - that there was to be obvious stress in very difficult aspects of home life, but ultimately good, or ultimately something worth fighting for, even when the character's not totally present.

There's something incredibly moving or difficult there, and something you always know the audience will sort of understand. So I think that was part of the concept of the film, establishing this home life. You would understand why it was a difficult phase, or Mara might be exhausted, or why her and her partner might have grown apart, but at the same time that ultimately, that there's clearly something substantial or worthwhile. And I think it really showcases our process of being able to tailor a film and touch on small moments in life. So I knew that inherently, those would be really wonderful scenes to shoot. And I think in a very passive way, in terms of production value, just in terms of injecting brief moments of life. I always knew that passively, that those would be, you know, in small ways, rich scenes because of that special collaboration with Avery, who plays their child.

Deragh Campbell: Yeah, I feel it's almost because Mara wasn't able to fully see her relationship with Samir and with Avery. But I think I'm kind of interested in this idea of when you're in a relationship, and there's something a bit mysterious about it, and you're so in it and also you're totally checked out. And the way it feels like almost a bit outside of your control. Like, sure Mara could go to a therapist, and she could probably discover some real reasons why she was checking out, and some real things that she was escaping from. But there is something about when you stop being present in your life and stop being able to totally recognize exactly what's in front of you. And instead, you're paying attention to something else. And there is just a certain amount you're not able to reckon with, like the reality of your reality, you know? Mara has to instead, put all her attention in this other space, like maybe the frickin' situation at her house is too real, like having a child, it's too real, you know? Like maybe it's a little too hard to look directly at something sometimes.

Kazik Radwanski: And then, even just again, thinking of it in a really simple way, outside of Matt and Mara's relationship in their personal lives, or, you know, aside from the dynamic between the two of them. Mara's character has a baby, and Matt's character, his father's dying, and I feel like they're opposites. But they're also life changes or ways that both characters are seeing themselves differently because of these events. So maybe Matt's character, seeing himself differently with his father dying, and Mara seeing herself differently as being a parent. That they're two major psychological changes, but also two situations where you just push forward. There's a line that Mara says, "These are just things that you do." when she's on the phone with Matt. And the film changes from being in this open, perhaps meandering kind of tempo like, what are we doing walking up the street and making each other smile? To the two of them dealing with a funeral, or going through very sort of beats of life pushing them forward. So yeah, I think there's a balance or parallel with new life in Mara's character and in Matt's character the death of his father.

Adam Nayman: Not just in terms of community and artistry– but how do you think Toronto is seen in this movie? Toronto manages to be present for those who recognize it and it's also kind of absent.

Kazik Radwanski: It's kind of placeless until they go to Niagara Falls, and then we're aware geographically where they are. But yeah, I think maybe that's how I, without sounding too cynical about the city, think that is maybe an aspect of Toronto, that it's really is a city you live in, but not really a city people visit.

Matt Johnson: I worry that in some ways the film casts Toronto in an artistically slightly dim light, simply because it seems as though a central thesis of the movie surrounds the real artists leaving this place and the wannabes staying. I think that, of course, is a Toronto trope and one we have talked about a lot. The film pays homage to that in a way that is completely realistic. A certain tension for Matt is that this is not where you stay if you wanna make it. And on his return, he keeps talking about how temporary it is. "Oh, I'm only here for a few days. I'm going back to New York. I still have my apartment in New York. Like, I'm not back. I'm not back with the rest of you." And so on...

Deragh Campbell: We weren't looking for places in the city that were like particularly cinematic or particularly beautiful. And I like the idea that you're moving through a lot of spaces that are not very aestheticized.

Do you have any anecdotes from the shooting? Any favourite scenes?

Kazik Radwanski: Towards the end of shooting, there were two important scenes; One is what gave us confidence in the title, Matt and Mara. It's when they are just getting the dry cleaners' slip, and in the moment, Matt says, "Put both of our names on it." It didn't occur to me then. But it was like, okay, yeah, that's our title! And that moment ended up ultimately informing the end of the film. It was a fleeting moment that resonated as a way of bookending the film, or a way of using that little piece of paper to represent their relationship. Then also in the funeral scene when they asked, "Can we move this cross?". I thought, could we actually move it in the scene? Where the gesture in real

life was very similar to the gestures we needed on screen.

Deragh Campbell: One of my favorite scenes, is where Mara describes not liking music. I was quite happy to try saying something that you actually mean. And then you see that everyone around you responds to it really badly. But, instead of backing off because of it, you try to keep in full earnestness, by saying why it is reasonable, and by not making any kind of concession to it. Because I think for me as a person I would realize very quickly that, what I was saying was perhaps not cool with the people I was saying it to, and so I would let the conversation go somewhere else. So I thought it was kind of fun to commit to that.

Kazik Radwanski: I feel like the dialogue in that scene is sort of a Deragh-ism as well, is this an echo of something you've said before, with musicians present?

Deragh Campbell: Well, It's true that I don't really like music.

Kazik Radwanski: What I loved too, that I discovered in the edit is that it feels like this big moment where your husband's a musician and you state that you don't like music and then later, totally unprompted, you're singing in the car with Matt. That it's something that your character naturally did in the film. It shows an arc between how the characters feel about art, and then being in a freer state. I just love how it felt like such a statement. And then also how it builds into the ending of the film, where you listen to the song with Mounir. There's something about music that can just kind of happen in the background. It very naturally evolved, but when you see it on screen, it feels intentional.

Matt Johnson: I wanted to say to Deragh that I also don't like music.

Deragh Campbell: Oh, cool. I think it means we're spiritually deficient.



Writer / Director

KAZIK RADWANSKI

Kazik Radwanski is a filmmaker and co-founder of Toronto-based production company MDFF. His previous film ANNE AT 13,000 FT (2019) premiered at The Toronto International Film Festival and was awarded the Rogers Best Canadian Film Award from the Toronto Film Critics Association. His other features include TOWER (2012) which had its world premiere at the Locarno International Film Festival and HOW HEAVY THIS HAMMER (2015) which had its international premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival. He also teaches as a full-time Professor at Humber's Film and Television Production program.

FILMOGRAPHY

2024 Matt and Mara
2019 Anne at 13,000 ft.
2017 Scaffold (Short)
2015 How Heavy This Hammer
2014 Cutaway (Short)
2012 Tower
2010 Green Crayons (Short)
2009 Out in That Deep Blue Sea (Short)
2008 Princess Margaret Blvd. (Short)
2007 Assault (Short)



Production Company

MDFF

MDFF stands for Medium Density Fibreboard Films. Founded by Dan Montgomery and Kazik Radwanski in 2009, MDFF is committed to exploring naturalistic, narrative and documentary forms in filmmaking with a focus on unique, director-driven projects that display a strong sense of cinematic handwriting. The company's films screened at some of the world's top film festivals, including the Berlinale, New York Film Festival, Venice, Locarno, SXSW, BFI London and Toronto International Film Festival.

For over 15 years the company has carved out a unique niche in the Canadian film landscape, not only as a production company but as a distribution entity as well. Since 2013, MDFF has presented cinematic offerings to local Toronto audiences that would otherwise have gone without theatrical exposure in the city. Under the banner of MDFF Selects, the company has aimed to contribute to the vibrant Toronto film scene and in turn, make space for a kind of filmmaking and community that puts the city on a similar platform as other world-class film cities. Through humble beginnings at well-known (and now defunct) multi-purpose arts hub Double Double Land, to Camera Bar (originally under creative direction by Atom Egoyan back in the mid-2000's), to historic art deco movie venue The Royal Cinema, the MDFF Selects screening series grew purposefully and organically over the years before teaming up with the TIFF Lightbox and Cinema Scope magazine to launch the latest iteration of the theatrical screening venture. In 2022, the company officially launched their MDFF Distribution arm and their first release slate included *THE MAIDEN* (2022), *QUEENS OF THE QING DYNASTY* (2022) and *CONCRETE VALLEY* (2022).

Executive Producers

ZAPRUDER FILMS

Zapruder Films was formed by Matt Johnson and Matthew Miller in 2013 after the success of their debut feature film *THE DIRTIES*, which was the winner of the Grand Jury Prize at Slamdance. Their follow-up feature, *OPERATION AVALANCHE*, premiered at Sundance in 2016. Following that they produced 2 seasons of the cult classic TV series *NIRVANNA THE BAND THE SHOW* (2016-17). Their latest film, *BLACKBERRY* (2023) had its world premiere in competition at the Berlin International Film Festival and went on to win the Golden Tomato for Best Limited Release Film and earn an Independent Spirit Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor for Glenn Howerton.

Executive Producers

ARBITRAGE PICTURES

Arbitrage Pictures is a Toronto-based production company with a focus on independent film. It also provides services specializing in business affairs and production finance. Neil Mathieson, president and founder, is a Canadian/American producer. Recent credits include Executive Producer on *SO MUCH TENDERNESS*, directed by Lina Rodriguez and *SLASHBACK*, directed by Nyla Innuksuk. Previously; Neil was Manager of International Sales and Business Affairs at Mongrel Media where he worked on such award-winning titles as *MENASHE* (A24), *THE TALE* (HBO), and *MAUDIE* (Sony Pictures Classics). Prior to that he was a Senior Analyst at Global Incentives administering over \$250M in tax credits on over 50 Films and TV shows. Projects include *THE REVENANT* (New Regency), *AMERICAN HUSTLE* (Annapurna), and *HANNIBAL* TV Series (Gaumont).

CAST

Mara / Deragh Campbell

Matt / Matt Johnson

Samir / Mounir Al Shami

Emma / Emma Healey

Avery / Avery Nayman

Maeve / Marlowe Granados

CREW

Director / Kazik Radwanski

Screenplay / Kazik Radwanski

Cinematography / Nikolay Michaylov

Editor / Ajla Odobašić

Sound Recordists / Ian Reynolds, Alex Hennessey, Ogo Eze

Sound Edit/Mix / Gabe Knox

Costume Designer / Mara Zigler

Producers / Dan Montgomery, Candice Napoleone

Associate Producers / Nikolay Michaylov, Samantha Chater

Executive Producers / Neil Mathieson

Matthew Miller, Matt Johnson,

Kazik Radwanski, Dan Montgomery

Production Company / Medium Density Fibreboard Films (MDFF)



ZAPRUDER FILMS

