

45 Years: A nightmare on the brain of the living?

By David Walsh
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Directed by Andrew Haigh; screenplay by Haigh, based on a short story by David Constantine

In Andrew Haigh's *45 Years*, Geoff (Tom Courtenay) and Kate Mercer (Charlotte Rampling), a childless, middle class couple living in a provincial English town, are on the eve of their 45th wedding anniversary. A large, elaborate party is planned at a historic venue. They are both retired. She was a teacher and he worked his way up from the factory floor apparently to be some sort of a manager.

Out of the blue, Geoff receives a letter informing him that the body of his former girl-friend, Katya, who fell to her death in the Swiss Alps half a century before, has been spotted, as the result of the impact of climate change on a glacier. She is there under the ice, frozen as she was, as a young woman. How strange it is, he says, that "she'll look like she did in 1962" while "I look like this."

The discovery and letter precipitate a crisis in the couple's relationship. Geoff has been informed about the discovery in Switzerland, he tells Kate, because he is registered as the dead woman's next of kin—the pair pretended to be married on their travels in the early 1960s so they could always share a single hotel room. Other revelations are even more unsettling, including Geoff's blunt admission that he would have married Katya had she survived.

He begins to smoke, becomes agitated, investigates traveling to Switzerland. Kate grows increasingly perturbed. Was she his "one and only"? Was she ever enough for him—or at least did he ever *think* she was? Can she feel the same way about him knowing what he has concealed for decades? The ending is deliberately ambiguous. Presumably, things will not return to the same comfortable groove.

The author of the short story (*In Another Country*) that inspired the film, British writer David Constantine, based the work on an incident he became aware of 15 years or

so again. According to *Telegraph* heard of the discovery of a twenty-something mountaineer who had fallen down a glacial crevasse in Chamonix [in the French Alps] in the 1930s. Seventy years on, the retreating ice released its hold on the guide's body, which the son he had fathered before his death was taken to identify. The shocking sight of his father—perfectly preserved in his prime, while he himself approached his eighties—tipped the son towards insanity."

It is an intriguing premise, and Haigh does a reasonably good job of exploring it. But *45 Years* includes some significant alterations. In Constantine's story, the couple is considerably older—and his Geoff and Katya were mountain climbing in the late 1930s when the fatal accident took place. That has some importance. Geoff thinks of himself and his girl-friend as having been "brave," traveling from Germany through Switzerland to Italy ("Hitler where they'd come from and Mussolini where they were going to")—having "turned their backs on civilization." Not insignificantly, Katya, an only child, was Jewish.

There is unmistakably a certain historical resonance in the story, and a sharp, deliberate contrast between this possibly "brave" past and the intervening decades of terribly conventional existence for Geoff and Kate and the apparently drab, uneventful quality of their marriage. The "Mr. and Mrs. Mercer" of *In Another Country* are considerably more stifled and self-repressed than the Rampling and Courtenay characters, and, ultimately, more despairing. At one point, in Constantine's story, Kate weeps to herself, "for the unfairness," and thinks, "Surely to God it wasn't much to ask, that you get through to the end and looking back you don't fill with horror and disappointment and hopeless wishful thinking? All she wanted was to be able to say it hasn't been nothing, it hasn't been a waste of time, the fifty years,

they amount to something. ...”

Do the changes introduced by the filmmakers matter? Yes, they do, in fairly major ways. Haigh’s Kate Mercer/Rampling is younger, more stylish, clearly more “with-it” in terms of both modern life and her own emotional states. Courtenay, although somewhat befuddled and disoriented, also seems fairly in touch with his own feelings and moods. It is more difficult in the case of the film characters’ marriage to imagine that some powerful undercurrent has been suppressed for more than 40 years, or that the husband and wife might be flooded with “horror and disappointment” at the thought of their lives together.

Haigh explained to an interviewer, “I love the idea of them being together for 45 years, but the possibility still existing that it could all break down in a week.” This is a little light-minded. In fact, there are many long-term relationships that would not “break down in a week” in the face of the Katya revelations (which, after all, relate to events before the couple met), or considerably worse. That such disclosures would produce a sudden lurch and upheaval in this *particular* marriage seems somewhat out of character and fails to convince entirely. As a result, I found *45 Years* less moving than it clearly—and a little too pointedly—intends to be. Rampling is relatively restrained, but I grew a little tired of her moping and her sad face. Oddly, though it does not seem planned that way, Courtenay (a wonderful actor, now 78) proves the more sympathetic figure.

Haigh, in fact, gives the strongest speech in *45 Years* to Geoff, who returns from a reunion lunch at his former workplace quite bitter: “You wouldn’t f-----g believe what they’ve done to the place. It’s all been streamlined. My first job on the floor doesn’t exist any more. I tell you, if I was still in management, I wouldn’t have let that happen. And the unions, they don’t give a s--t. Well, maybe they do and nobody takes any notice. ... And Len, he’s got a villa on the Algarve [in Portugal]. Do you remember Red Len? We used to call him Len-in, and now all he can talk about is playing golf on the Al-f-----g-garve with his grandson, who’s a banker. Red Len, with a banker for a grandson.”

45 Years and its central motif bring to mind another work, James Joyce’s “The Dead.” But here too the differences are telling. Joyce’s wonderful story, the final and longest piece in his collection, *Dubliners* (published in 1914), centers on Gabriel and Gretta Conroy, guests at an annual celebration held in January at the home of his aging aunts. Over the course of the evening, Gabriel’s

feelings for his wife, with whom he is going to spend a rare night in a hotel, grow in intensity. By the time they reach their room, on a snowy night, he is quite overwhelmed with desire.

Much to his consternation, Gabriel learns that the performance of an old ballad at the party has reminded his wife of a young boy of 17, who loved her and with whom she had been in love years before in another town. The youth, already ill, had come to see her in miserable winter weather and she believes this led to his early death. Gabriel discovers that the memory of the dead boy hovers powerfully over the present. “Gabriel felt humiliated. ... While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another.”

But Joyce had something larger in mind than merely an individual dilemma. The writer had left Ireland in disgust at its oppressiveness and backwardness in 1904. The “Dead” in the title who weigh so heavily on the living refers not simply to the boy who died tragically and whose memory endures, but to the condition of everyone in the story, the sentimental, nostalgic, self-pitying Irish urban petty bourgeois, “the living-dead who still inhabit a ghost world,” as commentator Charles Peake noted. These are “people who have allowed their lives to be annexed by the dead.” Dublin’s population is paralyzed, living in “a moribund city, where warmth and romance belong only to the memory of the dead who are buried.” Although the story is written with great sympathy for the individual characters, Joyce’s disgust and even horror at the general Irish malaise come through.

Contemporary artists and filmmakers generally ask considerably less of themselves. As a result, the ability of their work to penetrate and influence deeply is sharply limited. *45 Years* is intelligently done, but the filmmakers’ reduction of the drama to the fate of a couple of dissatisfied souls takes its toll. The opportunity was there, for example, to consider the influence of memories—or fantasies—about the more “liberated” 1960s on a certain generation, an ongoing and very tangible social phenomenon, but it was not taken.

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