



IN SEARCH OF A MIDNIGHT KISS

Autumn
Season
2008

USA, 2007, 90 mins.

Director: Alex Holdridge. Cast: Brian McGuire, Katy Luong, Sara Simmonds, Scoot McNairy

Review by Philip French, The Observer:

When I was a child, movie trailers held out hopes for a blissful future. Not so today. For some reason, the press screening last Monday morning of the week's blockbuster was preceded by three trailers for this summer's big action pictures, each a rapidly cut succession of hurtling bodies, car chases, shoot-outs, explosions and expensive special effects, featuring bland stars expressing amazement at the situations they find themselves in. My heart sank at the prospect of what Hollywood was setting before us these next couple of months.

This may well explain, in part at least, my immense enthusiasm for a low-budget, black-and-white movie, *In Search of a Midnight Kiss*, written and directed by Alex Holdridge, without a special effect, a studio set or a familiar face, though there is, this being a generally realistic film, the threat of violence. It's very much a collaborative exercise between the actors, production team and crew, all of them young Texans working in the thriving film culture of Austin, the state capital, and in Los Angeles.

The film is a realistic comedy of modern manners set in Los Angeles over a period of some 24 hours, starting on the morning of New Year's Eve. The depressed protagonist, 29-year-old Wilson (Scoot McNairy), is a would-be writer from Texas whose car was written off in Arizona on his way to California. His computer, containing various scripts, was stolen shortly after his arrival. His long-time relationship with a girl back home has broken up and he's been working as a clerk in a video shop (the movie slacker's occupation of choice these past 20 years).

After he's conjured up an engaging montage of midnight kisses at that sentimental moment - 00:00am on the clock - when the old year goes out and new hopes begin to the strains of 'Auld Lang Syne', Wilson reconciles himself to entering the New Year alone. But Jacob, his lifelong friend and flatmate, a small-time DJ (Brian McGuire), thinks he needs company, especially after he's caught Wilson masturbating over a photo of the beautiful Asian-American Min (Katie Luong), Jacob's soon-to-be fiancée. As it happens, Min, a musician, regards this as a compliment.



Nobody meets by chance any longer in LA. It's done on the web and within an hour of the appearance on the website Craig'slist of the personable Wilson's photo, accompanied by a note beginning: 'Misanthrope would like to meet a misanthrope', there's a call from Vivian (Sara Simmonds). The confident, good-looking Vivian, it transpires, is also from Texas. She's come to LA to pursue an acting career and has just dumped Jack, her boyfriend who'd accompanied her.

Determined to be in the right company at midnight, she's in the process of auditioning prospective partners. When she meets Wilson, they embark on a walking tour of downtown LA, an almost surreal world of squalor and magnificence, of elegant old buildings waiting to be pulled down and wonderful new ones like Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall. Before their rendezvous, Jacob and Min dress up Wilson in the right clothes for the occasion ('I look like a rodeo clown,' he says, rejecting their most outré outfit) and Jacob advises him on the new etiquette of how many condoms to carry on the first date.

The mating walk around town by young strangers is a familiar Hollywood ritual, stretching from Judy Garland and Robert Walker discovering New York together in Minnelli's *The Clock* (1945) to Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy exploring Vienna in Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995). Here, it's given a new freshness and frankness by Scoot McNairy and Sara Simmonds as they talk about life and love and get into the long abandoned, once grand Orpheum cinema to improvise a play on stage, although as they probe each other, the fragile relationship is always on the point of breaking up.

There's a particularly haunting moment when she indulges in her hobby of photographing single shoes abandoned on waste lots and in gutters, and we're given a montage of the images she preserves on her website.

'I think Los Angeles is where love comes to die,' Wilson observes, a theme anticipated by such writers as Edmund Wilson, Horace McCoy and Raymond Chandler and, more recently, by Robert Altman with *Short Cuts*, and his protégé Alan Rudolph, who made his directorial impact with a picture ironically called *Welcome to LA*, the setting identified as 'the city of one-night stands'.

Meanwhile, Jacob and Min visit the beach at Santa Monica, where they spent New Year's Eve the previous year, and Jacob is preparing to propose, offering her the ring his father used for all five of his weddings. Everyone spends a lot of their time using and talking about computers and speaking on mobile phones. Both Jacob and Wilson speak to their adoring mothers on the other side of the continent, and one of the film's highlights is an angry, obscene call from Vivian's violent ex-boyfriend that she takes at night on Sunset Boulevard, where the famous stars commemorating Hollywood legends are cut into the sidewalk. This precipitates an exciting dash to retrieve treasured possessions from the flat they shared, an exhilarating, potentially dangerous episode that seals the bond between Wilson and Vivian before the romantic business of midnight.



The muted, climactic scenes of this beguiling film offer surprises, both touching and wistful, and Robert Murphy's monochrome photography is excellent. Murphy's band Sybil performs a couple of songs on the soundtrack and he appears briefly as Vivian's volatile ex-lover.