



NEW RELEASES

# Aftersun

At their budget coastal resort in Turkey in the late 1990s, Calum, 30, and Sophie, 11, are mistaken for brother and sister. It's to do with his youthful looks, sure, but also the easy-going, conspiratorial humour they share as they swim, play pool, or film each other with a camcorder.

Calum is, in fact, Sophie's father. And if occasionally his genial, attentive parenting skills stumble – too tough teaching her self-defence here, stubbornly refusing a karaoke duet there – he always tries to shield her from a personal desperation and anguish he can't hold back. It's only years later, Sophie now probably the same age as her dad was then, that she tries to piece together the troubled man she didn't know. Still, how close can you get with just hazy childhood memories and grainy digital-video clips?

If adult Sophie's mission was always likely unachievable, US-based Scottish filmmaker Charlotte Wells's rendering of this impossible goal is a rousing success. In a remarkably assured feature debut, Wells somehow merges elliptical, near-abstract impressions of an unresolved father-daughter bond with sharp social-realist observation of Brits abroad. Certainly, anyone who's ever experienced the doubtful glories of the cheap Mediterranean package holiday will nod in rueful recognition at the scaffolding-clad hotel, or a joyless tour reps-led Macarena.

Such trifles don't bother Sophie. She's clearly thrilled to be spending quality, one-on-one time with her dad (her parents are evidently separated and she lives with her mum), though she's also just old enough to pick up on and probe things that puzzle her. Why, for example, does her dad sign off a phone call to his ex-wife with 'Love you'? Why does he answer her innocent video interview enquiry 'When you were 11, what did you think you would be?' with a stony, angst-ridden silence?

But Sophie has plenty of other things on her mind too. She overhears teen girls bragging about their sexual encounters. She enjoys showing off her cue skills to impressed twentysomethings. A forthright pre-pubescent lad takes a shine to her. She isn't on holiday to study her father. It's not her but the audience who see Calum take a surreptitious smoke on the balcony; and, alone one night, break down in stifled sobs on his hotel bed. The beauty of Gregory Oke's tactile, colour-saturated images and often semi-obscured framing is that they express both the young Sophie's oblivious perspective and her older self's heightened attempt to (re-)construct a picture of her father that won't ever fully shift into focus.

Wells has form in this. Her short film *Laps* (2016) detailed a New York subway sexual assault in an intimate, fragmented style, and 2015's *Tuesday* examined a teenage girl processing the loss of her father with a deflected, tender sorrow. Comparisons can be made to the sensual, poetic naturalism of fellow Scot Lynne Ramsay – and to the reflected, melancholic glow of *Moonlight* (2016), whose Oscar-winners Barry Jenkins and Adele Romanski are credited as producers here.

There's a deep, ephemeral sadness at the heart of *Aftersun*, with disquieting moments such as an unrelenting march into the pitch-black ocean seeming to

foretell Calum's tragic fate. Wells has talked of drawing on a similar Turkish holiday she and her own father took when she was around Sophie's age, but maintains her film is 'emotionally autobiographical' rather than literally so. She deliberately keeps things open to interpretation, even the exact timeframe of Sophie and Calum's holiday (though Britpop aficionados could pinpoint Blur's 'Tender' on the soundtrack as the summer of 1999). By holding her mysteries close, she draws us in closer still.

None of this would land as powerfully were it not for the utter believability of the two lead actors as family. Rising Irish star Paul Mescal, fresh from *Normal People*, again displays his singular blend of brooding masculinity underpinned by aching vulnerability. And newcomer Frankie Corio is a wonderfully authentic presence, somehow nailing Sophie's unguarded delight in holiday fun and also those moments where, as if the bright sun were swallowed up by a cloud, she suddenly senses that she must put on an act for those around her, not least her own dad. Like Wells's own achievement, Corio's big-screen debut is full of vitality, subtlety and promise, in what's likely to be among the best first films of the year.

**Leigh Singer, *Sight and Sound*, December 2022**

### **Charlotte Wells on 'Aftersun'**

My parents were quite young when I was born and growing up my dad would often be mistaken for my brother. It always seemed a fun relationship to explore on film and when I was flipping through old holiday albums toward the end of film school, the idea began to take hold. I wanted to portray a relationship that wasn't excessively fraught. Sophie and Calum have some ups and downs over the course of the trip, but their relationship itself isn't a huge source of conflict. I wanted Calum to be a good father which felt in a lot of ways working against the absent father type. Calum is struggling in some facets of his life, but being a parent isn't one of them.

As I get older, I spend more time reflecting on how my parents balanced their own lives and identities, particularly throughout their 20s and early 30s, with having a child. Often for kids, parents are just parents and their inner lives are completely unknown or even unconsidered. Looking back, things they did or said carry completely different import and so I was interested in this idea of re-evaluating moments or conversations from the past through a lens evolved by time. There's a single video that exists of me from around Sophie's age and it's a clip of mini-DV footage that is totally banal: my dad, his friend, and I sitting around a table playing a game, our heads cut off at the top of frame. I think for a certain generation, DV footage creates immediate feelings of nostalgia, but the actual footage, at least the footage I have, isn't very interesting.

### **Production notes**

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## AFTERSUN

*Directed by:* Charlotte Wells

©: Turkish Riviera Run Club Limited, British Broadcasting Corporation,

The British Film Institute, Tango

*a Pastel/Unified Theory production*

*Presented by:* BBC Film, BFI, Screen Scotland

*In association with:* Tango

*Developed and made with the support of:* BBC Film

*Supported by the* Scottish Government

*and the* National Lottery through Screen Scotland

*Made with the support of:* BFI's Film Fund

*Executive Producers:* Eva Yates, Lizzie Francke, Kieran Hannigan,

Tim Headington, Lia Buman

*Producers:* Adele Romanski, Amy Jackson, Barry Jenkins, Mark Ceryak

*Co-producers:* Alex Sutherland, Ana Leocha, Neil Shah

*Casting by:* Lucy Pardee

*Written by:* Charlotte Wells

*Cinematography:* Gregory Oke

*Editing:* Blair McClendon

*Production Design:* Billur Turan

*Costume Design:* Frank Gallacher

*Music:* Oliver Coates

*Sound Design:* Jovan Ajder

## Cast

Paul Mescal (*Calum*)

Frankie Corio (*Sophie*)

Celia Rowson-Hall (*adult Sophie*)

UK-USA 2022©

98 mins

A MUBI release

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## NEW RELEASES

### The Greenaway Alphabet

From Fri 11 Nov

### No Bears

From Fri 11 Nov

### Aftersun

From Fri 18 Nov

### What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?

(*Ras vkhedavt, rodesac cas vukurebt?*)

From Fri 25 Nov

### Lynch/Oz

From Fri 2 Dec

### Corsage

From Tue 27 Dec

## RE-RELEASES

### Nil by Mouth

From Fri 4 Nov (Preview on Thu 20 Oct 20:20; extended intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large on Fri 4 Nov 17:50; intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI Archive on Mon 7 Nov 18:00)

### The Draughtsman's Contract

From Fri 11 Nov (+ intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI National Archive on Fri 11 Nov 17:50)

### Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander)

From Fri 2 Dec

### The Queen of Spades

From Fri 23 Dec

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