



NEW RELEASES

May December

May December

Directed by: Todd Haynes

A Gloria Sanchez production

A MountainA production

A Killer Films production

In association with: Taylor & Dodge, Project Infinity

Presented by: Rocket Science

Executive Producers: Madeleine K. Rudin,

Thomas K. Richards, Lee Broda, Jeff Rice,

Jonathan Montepare, Samy Burch, Alex Brown,

Thorsten Schumacher, Claire Taylor

Produced by: Natalie Portman, Sophie Mas,

Pamela Koffler, Christine Vachon,

Grant S. Johnson, Tyler W. Konney,

Jessica Elbaum, Will Ferrell

Co-producer: Timothy Bird

Screenplay by: Samy Burch

Story by: Samy Burch, Alex Mechanik

Director of Photography: Christopher Blauvelt

Editor: Afonso Gonçalves

Production Designer: Sam Lisenco

Art Director: Eric Dean

Costume Designer: April Napier

Make-up: Heba Thorisdottir, Susan Reilly Lehane

Hair: Nicole Bridgeford, Kim Santantonio

Music from the film The Go-Between by:

Michel Legrand

With adaptation and original score by:

Marcelo Zarvos

Cast:

Natalie Portman (Elizabeth)

Julianne Moore (Gracie)

Charles Melton (Joe Yoo)

Cory Michael Smith (Georgie)

Elizabeth Yu (Mary Atherton-Yoo)

Gabriel Chung (Charlie Atherton-Yoo)

Piper Curda (Honor Atherton-Yoo)

D.W. Moffett (Tom Atherton)

Lawrence Arancio (Morris Sperber)

USA 2023

117 mins

Digital

A Sky release

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Todd Haynes knows how to write complicated women. Ever since Julianne Moore stepped into the role of a housewife suffering from a mysterious quasi-psychosomatic illness in Haynes's environmental thriller *Safe* (1995), his films have featured heroines who are hard to fathom, but infinitely fascinating. In Haynes's dark comedy *May December* Moore plays Gracie Atherton-Yoo, a former pet-store worker whose affair with an adolescent boy, Joe, created a media frenzy in her middle-class community in Savannah, Georgia. The story begins more than two decades after the scandal, as an indie film is to be made about Gracie and Joe, who's now 36. The key events are quickly established by Haynes, through images of tabloid front-pages and Gracie's own telling: we discover that the two dutifully married and Gracie had Joe's baby in prison. The couple now enjoy an ordinary life of barbecues and pool parties, children and even grandchildren (from Gracie's previous marriage), although Gracie's baking home-business turns out to be largely financed by a few loyal friends who take pity on her. Meanwhile Gracie certainly remains ostracised by some, and endures swipes about her promiscuity by colleagues at a local charity where she helps out.

Natalie Portman plays Elizabeth Berry, the actress who is to portray the younger Gracie. Elizabeth arrives at Gracie's family home to shadow her in her daily chores, to observe and later imitate her subject's gestures, but also, increasingly, to probe the murkier depths of the affair and her psyche – which turns out to be near impossible. Here is the plot's central paradox: played by Moore as mostly unfazed, though at times unexpectedly inconsolable, Gracie isn't actually looking to be redeemed. The more Elizabeth snoops around, interviewing Gracie's loved ones, such as her ex-husband and children, and the more she insists that Gracie acknowledge the damage that the affair did to her family, the more Gracie rebuffs any notion that her love for Joe can be somehow wrong.

Haynes bathes the film's images in softly puddled southern light, stressing the happiness of the couple's life. In the hands of the veteran cinematographer Christopher Blauvelt – also behind Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), *Certain Women* (2016) and *First Cow* (2019) – it is as if the fierce light has vaporised hard objects and rougher, nuanced textures, rendering them translucent. In such a world, there appears to be nothing to hide. Slowly, though, Gracie's persona cracks under Elizabeth's encroachments. Her comments to her daughters about their weight reveal how deeply she has internalised chauvinist attitudes passed down to her by her own mother. In fact, her motherly permissiveness – though perhaps also micro-managing – of Joe contrasts upsettingly with her harsher attitude towards her children.

As the baby-faced, delicate Joe, Charles Melton infuses the story with a welcome forthrightness that's the opposite of Gracie and Elizabeth's infinite cat-and-mouse dance. Where, despite professing good intentions, Elizabeth is ruthless in her ambition to break out in a new role, to the point of preying on Gracie and everyone in her household. Meanwhile, Gracie's so addicted to the single version of events that paints Joe as her equal – no matter at what age – that she never gets past all the smoke and mirrors. Unlike them, Joe appears to be on a real quest for a deeper personal truth – even if, in the end, such reckoning cannot be gleaned from the fractured, conflicting versions of his life. Haynes's film shines brightest in moments of such genuine anguish and ambiguity, which clash, rather tragically, with Gracie's obdurate clinging to her persona.

Fiction and fact, self-delusion and self-truth are given a dangerous edge in a film that, ultimately, isn't about Gracie's actions so much as society's appetite for demonstrations of compunction, even where none is felt. While society

NEW RELEASES

The Old Oak

Continues from 29 Sep

How to Have Sex

From Fri 3 Nov

Is There Anybody Out There?

From Fri 17 Nov

May December

From Fri 17 Nov

The Eternal Daughter

From Fri 24 Nov

Fallen Leaves (Kuolleet lehdet)

From Fri 1 Dec

Queendom

From Fri 1 Dec

Tish

From Fri 15 Dec (Preview on Fri 1 Dec 18:00 + Q&A with director Paul Sng)

Priscilla (preview screenings)

Previews from Wed 27 Dec. Opens Fri 5 Jan

The Boy and the Heron (Kimitachi wa do Ikiruka)

From Wed 27 Dec

RE-RELEASES

I Know Where I'm Going!

From Thu 19 Oct

Mean Streets

From Fri 20 Oct

Pressure

From Fri 3 Nov

The Red Shoes

From Fri 8 Dec

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

demands its martyrs, Gracie both dazzles and irritates by refusing to be one. With the choice of one fair, blonde actress, and another as a feistier brunette, Haynes invites comparisons to Bergman's *Persona* (1966). But whereas there's certainly a parasitic power play between the two women, the film's edgy and satirical tone take it closer to Gus Van Sant's *To Die For* (1995). It convincingly shows how a woman can be both prey to vicious societal impositions and wholesale fairytales of marital life, and in profound denial about her own predatory behaviour. The lines of what is truly moral are constantly crossed in *May December*, a film that resolutely prods the complicity of the media – including cinema – in feeding the machinery of lies.

Ela Bittencourt, *Sight and Sound*, December 2023

Todd Haynes on 'May December'

I loathed the two women characters, Gracie [Moore] and Elizabeth [Portman]. You've said that they are different from women characters in your other films, or the characters Julianne played in Far from Heaven and Safe [1995]. And yet it is very much a Todd Haynes family, with parents and children.

I would say it's not like most of my domestic stories, with the exception of [2011 HBO miniseries] *Mildred Pierce*, because the women in most of my stories don't have access to their desires or their will the way these women do. The women in the earlier films are much more subjugated in different kinds of ways from film to film. That part of it was crazy and exceptional. The only thing that gives you any sympathy for either woman is in relief against the other. The power of each is relative and embedded in larger systems. So you keep shifting back and forth between trusting and mistrusting one or the other. It's not like a Todd Haynes film because the women are so difficult to like and care about. It's the children you care about. And you feel that despite all this stuff with their parents, they are going to figure it out and be all right. So there's hope. And you care about the man, Gracie's husband Joe – there's hope that he'll figure it out too.

I already mentioned how I was not ready to think about certain aspects of the Mary Kay Letourneau story. But Julianne had a very strong idea that this woman wasn't a paedophile, that she had a princess syndrome, an intense need to be rescued by a young, virile man. It's like the myth of the young knight, who, with his sheer virility and stunning youth, will save you, the damsel in distress. This enabled both parties to deny the age difference, because the power could shift back into his sure hands or whatever. And I did want those lines in the final bedroom scene – 'Who's the boss?' and 'Who was in charge? Who was in charge? Who was in charge?' – to suggest the myth that they live under.

This movie was just so full of extremes and exceptions and tabloid excess. It's also about people who refuse to look at themselves and the choices they make, which we all do, and I knew I also was doing.

Also, it's a potentially explosive or disturbing [film] for today's identity politics culture, which wants to know who's good and who's bad. There's volatility, impenetrability and moral ambiguity here. And we had to do it quickly and with great economy. The simplicity of the coverage was the only way we could get this done. Letting the blank spaces, the non-speech moments between the dialogue, speak as loudly as, or more loudly than, anything said. As is almost always the case with the films I've made, it was an experiment. You just throw these things together and you go, 'OK. This is it.' There was no net. There was no other way to cut it. We have no other coverage. So if it didn't work... But because it was so much fun to make, I kept going, 'It's probably not going to hold together, but I really don't care. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything.'

Todd Haynes interviewed by Amy Taubin, *Sight and Sound*, December 2023