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Last Swim (15)

Dir: Sasha Nathwani

With: Deba Hekmat, Solly McLeod, Denzel Baidoo

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Synopsis: Ziba is an ambitious and brainy young Londoner. Proud of her Iranian heritage, she is conscientious and sensible but also indulges in a certain romantic nihilism. Perhaps this is because of her passion for astronomy, or perhaps because she longs for happier times. Although she is the only member of her close-knit friendship group to attain good results in the end-of-school exams, she is struggling to remain optimistic. She and her friends want to spend the day together in the hot summer London and witness a unique celestial event. Secretly, Ziba is planning an irreversible step that – in her mind – will give her back control over her life. Caught between a deep passion for being alive and an overwhelming desire to end the pain and fear of her current reality, Ziba must learn to let go of her adolescent dreams and cope with uncertainty.

Teenage Ziba plans a meticulous day of fun with her three best friends culminating in a meteor shower viewing that will set her up for the astrophysics degree she has been accepted for at UCL. But as the day runs to schedule, Ziba struggles to keep up, feeling her plans slip away but all the while refusing to admit the truth about her situation.

With a strong central performance from Deba Hekmat, *Last Swim* captures well the mixture of hope and fear, possibility and endings that summarise the mixed feelings on results day. Ziba's perspective is consistently maintained as the character both tries to keep her agenda on track but slowly starts to embrace the random events and opportunities emerging from a developing devil-may-care attitude as the hours pass, discovering that real fun and real living happens between the lines of her fixed agenda.

Nathwani immerses the camera in the group, an extra friend who is continually wrapped in with Ziba, Tara, Shea and Murf, but also alert to the presence of young footballer Malcolm who remains an outsider of the core group. Nonetheless, whether sitting on Primrose Hill, walking along Haymarket or traveling in Shea's small car, these friends are physically tight knit, and Nathwani brings the viewer into that connection and the easy intimacy that makes space for each other.

Hekmat is matched by Lydia Fleming (Tara), Jay Lycurgo (Murf), Solly McLeod (Shea) and Denzel Baidoo (Malcolm) who complete the pals, and there is a real sense of the close links they have formed as



they ride bikes in the sun carefree but also when they rush to help and support on another in times of difficulty. But each retains an undercurrent of something not quite right in their wider lives, be it Ziba's secret which the audience learns at the start, Malcolm's football career or even Murf's grief briefly alluded to on Primrose Hill.

Last Swim is sometimes a melancholy film but Nathwani's conclusion shows that the unexpected can also change everyone's plans. With a strong set of characters, this may not be their last swim after all, perhaps Nathwani will drop in to see how they are all doing a few years from now.

Credits

Ziba	Deba Hekmat
Tara	Lydia Fleming
Malcolm	Denzel Baidoo
Shea	Solly McLeod
'Murf'	Jat Lycurgo
Tonya	Michelle Greenidge
Mona	Narges Rashidi
Young Ziba	Nika Roufi
Professor Walters	Matthew Steer
Maggie Aderin Pocock	Self
Dr Nolan	Alex Blake
Teacher	Emeline Nsingi Nkosi
Gilda	Mina Gheisari
Maryam	Roxana Shirazi
Aunt	Zara Browne
Nurse	Katie Glaister
Director	Sasha Nathwani,
Screenplay	Sasha Nathwani, Helen Simmons
Music	Federico Albanese
Cinematography	Olan Collardy
Editing	Stephen Dunne

UK 2024 100m

Take Two

The director of a new film set in a sweltering London over 24 hours on A-Level results day says that the city he grew up in is now "inaccessible" to many Gen Z young adults.

Last Swim, Sasha Nathwani's first feature film, is the story of an ambitious British Iranian teen, Ziba (played by Deba Hekmat), who, along with her group of friends savours a day of total freedom, as well as experiencing tough decisions and heartbreak, before the group go their separate ways after school.

The director tells the BBC that "the film was developed and made by Millennials, but it's a Gen Z coming of age story". He says his interest in making the film was exploring the idea of lost youth and that the script, co-written by producer Helen Simmons, was written at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, although filmed after restrictions ended.

"It's not a pandemic film," he says, "but it was developed during that time when young people from all over the world were having the seminal years of their lives taken away. When Helen and I were writing it, the world was opening up and closing down, then opening up and closing down again. There was this pressure, and I remember seeing young people in the park, and thinking how must it be for them?"

"They all live with their parents, they've only got one day together, and tomorrow the world's going to close down again. So the question I was trying to pose with the film was, if you had one day to reclaim your youth, what would you do?"

Nathwani, who's previously directed music videos as well as short films, says that it's his belief things have worsened for the young after Covid-19.

"I felt that the world was fraught when we were making it, when we were writing it, and now it's going out into the world, there's an argument that things are even worse now," he says. When I was 17 or 18, growing up in London, the city didn't feel inaccessible. It felt accessible, and I didn't feel like doors were being closed in my face. Now I don't even know how a young person has a 24-hour period of freedom without breaking the bank."

He added: "We're in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Not only do things cost so much, but there just aren't opportunities. Education is challenging for lots of different reasons, and some people don't have access because of the exorbitant costs. You see that in the film, as Ziba and her friends are going their separate ways."

A 2023 study from Oxford University found that the mental health of young people had deteriorated during the UK's three Covid-19 lockdowns, compared with a similar study conducted before the pandemic.

And the latest ONS (Office for National Statistics) figures found that around one in seven 16-24 year olds were not in work, education or training between October-December 2024.

Figures from the King's Trust charity from February 2025 found that most of the 16-25 year olds it had surveyed felt anxious about the future on a daily basis.

Most of the cast members of *Last Swim* are Gen Z, although Gangs of London actress Narges Rashidi also stars in the story, as Ziba's mother.

Lead star Hekmat, a Kurdish British model and actor, was aged 21 when the film was made. "As a generation, there have been things thrown at us, but also taken away," she says. "That's true of me, but when I look at my brothers, that's when my heart really goes out to the young. My brothers just turned 18 and 20 years old, they were going through adolescence during Covid, there were so many changes in their personal and school life anyway, and then for all of that to happen. We're all still regrouping and refiguring ourselves out."

Filmed in the UK heatwave of 2022, *Last Swim* takes Ziba and her group of friends through well-known spots of London such as Portobello Road, Hampstead Heath and Primrose Hill by car, bike and train.

Industry publication Screen Daily said the film was "shot, one suspects, with a touch of guerrilla ingenuity... *Last Swim* also has a

palpably improvised component in the friends' genially pitched running banter."

The director agrees that the young cast had freedom to change the script "to make it as authentic as possible".

"I think whenever you tell a story about young characters, you need to give them a certain amount of flexibility," Nathwani says.

"If there was a more natural way of delivering a line in a language that they would more authentically use, we would then write that into the script.

"And they were very good at challenging me as well. They would challenge me about choices that I and Helen had made on the page if they didn't feel it rang true of their characters."

"This is Gen Z friendship on screen," adds Hekmat. "Sasha says that his [Millennial] generation is the one of hard knocks and they didn't grow up with the idea that mental health needed to be considered in day to day lives.

I think a great way of seeing how connected this film is to Gen Z is just the friendship that me and the rest of the gang have together.

They're not afraid to ask each other about their feelings and the boys aren't afraid to open up a bit more. I think it's really reflective of our friendships in the way that we are able to speak to each other."

As independent cinema tries to seek a greater audience amongst the young post-Covid-19, Nathwani says he hopes his film captures the energy of youth, although tapping into some much harder emotions and decisions.

"That's the interesting thing about that strange time between school and further education, because the bond that you have with your friends from school will never be closer, tighter than it is during that summer," he explains.

"And the moment that summer ends, those bonds tend to break because people go in different directions. And just in the context of what's happening in the UK, but across the world too, I think that's really challenging for young people, more so than I think we envision."

Emma Jones: BBC Talking Movies

Our next screening

Friday September 26th, 7.30pm

Motel Destino (Brazil/France/Germany 2024. 18)

We don't often show 18 certificate films but with *Motel Destino*, the film noir gets full-on 2025 treatment. It's a vibrant, erotic thriller from Karim Ainouz about 21-year-old Heraldo (Iago Xavier), on the run after a botched hit, who arrives at the neon-hued *Motel Destino*, a roadside sex hotel shimmering under Brazil's burning blue skies and run by hot-headed Elias (Fábio Assunção) and his restless younger wife Dayana (Nataly Rocha). His arrival disrupts the established order leading to unspooling loyalties and intertwining desires. It's sweaty and sensual, a 'dance of power, desire and liberation, full of humour and kitsch' (Independent Cinema Office), shot in dayglo hues on location in Brazil's Ceará region.