

How to Have Sex [15]

2023 UK/Greece 91 mins

UK released	3 November 2023
Director	Molly Manning Walker
Screenplay	Molly Manning Walker
Cinematography	Nicolas Canniccioni
Music	James Jacob
Cast	Mia McKenna-Bruce (Tara); Lara Peake (Skye); Shaun Thomas (Badger); Samuel Bottomley (Paddy); Enva Lewis (Em); Laura Ambler (Paige)

Here's a cause for celebration for fans of British cinema: a feature debut that launches not one but two of the most promising talents to arrive in movie theatres for a long while. Writer and director Molly Manning Walker is the complete package: a storyteller with an acute ear for youth vernacular; a film-maker with a gift for capturing images that sear themselves into your eyes, while also filling each frame with a sensory overload of energy and movement; and a director who can tease remarkably intimate and revealing moments from actors while simultaneously marshalling a club full of several hundred hard-partying extras. And the film's star, Mia McKenna-Bruce, is a revelation.

How to Have Sex, which won the Un Certain Regard award at Cannes in May, takes one of the central themes of innumerable 1990s and 00s teen comedies – the desperate quest to lose your virginity (and preferably party to oblivion at the same time) – and peels back the riotous excess and hedonism to uncover some uncomfortable questions about the grey areas of consent and the coercive influence of peers. Walker's handling of the film's tonal range is remarkably assured: the picture is skittish, spirited and very funny, and at the same time troubling and bruisingly sad.

Tara (McKenna-Bruce) and her two school friends, Em (Enva Lewis), the brainy one, and Skye (Lara Peake), the bitchy one, arrive in the party resort of

Malia, Crete, with the loud and frequently expressed intention of having the “Best! Holiday! Eva!” Their GCSEs are over and the future, for Tara at least, is a question mark.

You get the sense that these teens on the cusp of adulthood are trying out their idea of being a woman – like kids playing dress up. It’s a Claire’s accessories version of womanhood, all synthetic sparkles, adornment and prancing around in front of mirrors. And the same is true of sexuality: in the absence of knowing with absolute certainty what it is they want from an encounter (and crucially, how to communicate this), the girls slip into prescribed roles. This is particularly true for Tara, the least sexually experienced of the three, who, as Skye frequently points out with a cackle of derision, is still a virgin at 16.

Tara’s increasing discomfort with the way the holiday plays out and the sex that eventually happens is revealed not so much in dialogue – the whole point of the film is that she, and girls her age, lack the crucial vocabulary to talk about their needs and experiences – but in McKenna-Bruce’s mercurially expressive face. She is transfixing.

Equally eloquent is the film’s use of sound. In another scene, drunk and overwhelmed by earlier events, Tara attempts to lose herself in the endless party. She climbs onto a podium, but the balance of the sound mix shifts so that it’s her ragged, anxious breathing that we hear rather than the music. She’s surrounded by fellow clubbers, all of them united in joyous abandon. But at this moment, nobody has ever looked more alone.

Wendy Ide, *The Observer*, 5 November 23 (abridged)

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