

The Stars at Noon (2022)



American reporter Trish & mysterious Brit Daniel fall for each other while trying to escape from Nicaragua.
(c) A24

Director Claire Denis' murky film, set in Nicaragua early in the Covid pandemic, might remind one of a Graham Greene novel with its flawed heroine and mysterious oil man lover and intelligence agents from the US and Costa Rica. The novel by Dennis Johnson that it is based on was set during the Sandinista era, so the politics of the film are shadowy—just that the country is a police state with soldiers wielding automatic rifles stationed on every block or patrolling the streets.

Trish (Margaret Qualley) is a journalist whose passport has been confiscated by the authorities, her dollars traded for almost worthless Cordobas, and thus desperately wanting to get out of the country. The cause of her mistreatment apparently some articles about war crimes she was researching. Her long distant call to a New York editor whom she pitches a Costa Rica travel article is coldly turned down, the heartless man ordering her not to call him again. She has been reduced to selling her body for dollars from minor government officials and cops and an occasional businessman. This pays for her food and lodgings at a dingy motel that she calls a “cesspool.”

One night in the bar of the Inter-Continental Hotel she spots

Daniel (Joe Alwyn). He is dressed in the kind of suit associated with imperialists, white and well cut. He claims to be a British oilman with a wife at home—though the latter does not keep him from accepting her advances. She charges \$50 for their tryst, and seeing him the next day talking with a man she thinks is a Costa Rican spy, she enters into a torrid affair with him. And I do mean torrid, this film at one time probably would have been designated NC-17, with so much flesh bared to the camera.

As the days go by they copulate and over indulge in drinks. In one sequence they are followed by an agent trailing them. It becomes obvious they must flee the country because of danger—a taxi driver they had employed is found dead, his mouth crammed with a mobile phone. They leave the city and head cross country to the border. This is where the American CIA agent (Benny Safdie) encounters them. He seems to know everything about the pair and wants Trish to sign some papers that, well, something to do with Daniel. Everything is murky in this tale that has reminded some of *The Year of Living Dangerously*, except that Trish seems to have no concern for politics or the poor citizens of the country. Just as murky for me is the significance of the title—we do see stars in a daylight sky in one brief shot, but why I have no idea. The movie was shot in Panama, so the scenery is lovely, and for those who enjoy artfully shot sex, the film will have its pleasures. Beyond this it has little to offer despite the international reputation of its director.

No questions for this film.