

120 Beats per Minute [15] 2017|France|143 min

UK release date	6th April 2018
Director	Robin Campillo
Screenplay	Robin Campillo
Cinematographer	Jeanne Lapoirie
Cast	Nahuel Pérez Biscayart (Sean); Arnaud Valois (Nathan); Adèle Haenel (Sophie); Antoine Reinartz (Thibault); Félix Maritaud (Max)

A two-hour historical drama about gay activism in the late 1980s/early 1990s – with subtitles! – might sound like a hard sell, but French writer-director Robin Campillo’s *120 Beats Per Minute* is also a deep house opera, an urgent, steamy love story and a jubilant battle cry that demands to be witnessed. Centring on the activist group Act Up-Paris, an offshoot of the Aids Coalition to Unleash Power that started in New York in 1987, it serves as a snapshot of those who resisted in the early days of the disease’s global pandemic. The film lives its “politics in the first person”, showing how Act Up lobbied for legislation, research and treatment for those with HIV/Aids, while also tracking a tender romance between two of its members.

Campillo places the viewer bang in the middle of the Act Up community, staging one of the first scenes at an introductory meeting. Like the new recruits, we learn the organising principles (and the rules) from the inside. Fresh from a demonstration, members wearing fake-blood-splattered T-shirts explain that – in this lecture hall – democracy means transparency. There will be no clapping (just clicking) so as not to drown out those speaking, and all debate will take place in the room (private conversations and hallway chatter are prohibited).

The tension and infighting Campillo shows is riveting and edifying. This isn’t the rose-tinted memory of an overlooked political movement, but the pulling of the afflictive past into the present tense. And what could be more afflictive than love? Dramatic personal stakes are introduced as militant HIV-“poz” livewire Sean (the scene-stealing Nahuel Pérez Biscayart) and shy, handsome

new member Nathan (Arnaud Valois) are drawn into each other's orbits. Yet Campillo is careful to cast the Aids crisis as both personal tragedy and social epidemic.

A bird's-eye view shot of the group lining the streets of Paris with their bodies – a corpse parade – is cut with archive footage of the real die-in in 1989, linking Act Up-Paris with France's history of civil resistance. This is Campillo's great gift: the scale of the history being explored is never compromised, despite the film's growing interest in the intimate relationships on the ground.

Much like Act Up's non-hierarchical structure, conversation, dancing and sex are all presented as essential, inseparable forms of direct action – and all are vital parts of the film's DNA. Whether in scenes of the group storming high schools to distribute condoms and leaflets about STDs, or a hospital bed hand-job offered as an act of love, the film doesn't shy away from sex.

What feels revolutionary – and revelatory – about this film and its characters is the way they manage to find moments of galvanising fury and ecstatic joy while in the grip of debilitating disease. Electronic musician Arnaud Rebotini's dissonant, humming, house-inflected score – and the metronome-like heartbeats that underscore the action – are reminders that, even on their deathbed, a person has a pulse. In its dying gasps, the film grasps at life.

After: **Simran Hans, The Observer, 8 April 18**

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