

# The one-night stand that sparked a classic

## The director Richard Linklater tells **Tim Teeman** the bittersweet story of a brief encounter with a stranger that gave us *Before Sunrise* and its sequels

Those who race for the exit as a movie's closing credits roll will miss, at the end of Richard Linklater's much-anticipated *Before Midnight*, its dedication to a woman named Amy Lehrhaupt. This third film, following *Before Sunrise* (1995) and *Before Sunset* (2004), examines the continuing witty, sexy, fraught relationship of Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy) who first meet by

**“We talked about art, science, film, the gamut. We flirted”**

chance one night in Vienna. Lehrhaupt, Linklater reveals for the first time, was the woman with “crazy, cute, wonderful energy” he met one night in October 1989 who inspired the films. “What Amy represented for me — and what I hope the films represent to people — is something about the poetry of attraction, interaction and romance,” the 52-year-old Linklater says. He’s sitting in his production office — a trailer, walls covered with vintage movie posters — on a disused airfield in Austin, Texas. It’s managed as a film production centre by the Austin Film Society he helped to found.

He is irreverent, warm, boyish of face, bearish of body with shaggy hair and great calves; a critically adored indie director whose diverse CV includes the teen slacker movie *Dazed and Confused*, the riotously twangy *School of Rock* and the period Hollywood drama *Me and Orson Welles*. Financiers and audiences who first pegged him as a slacker director (his breakthrough movie was, indeed, called *Slacker*) later found the label wanting, which cheers him. The brooding *Before* films “didn’t fit with people’s perceptions of me,” Linklater says, “but the audience invested in Ethan and Julie and it grew over time.”

Linklater, 29 in 1989, was visiting his sister in Philadelphia when he met Lehrhaupt, in her early twenties, in a toy shop. Just like Jesse and Celine in *Before Sunrise* they walked, “looked at shit... talked about art, science, film, the gamut”, flirted “and had a wonderful night; neither of us had any agenda”. They kissed. Did they have sex? Linklater laughs and blurts: “I want to leave a little mystery!” (His expression betrays enough.) Like Jesse in *Before Sunrise* Linklater had to leave the next morning; separation forever loomed in this era pre-internet and mobile phone.

Unlike Jesse and Celine, though, circumstance never brought Linklater and Lehrhaupt together again. They exchanged phone calls, but Linklater soon met “a significant girlfriend” and never heard from Lehrhaupt again. He thought that she might come to a screening of *Before Sunrise* he was at. But for years, nothing. Then, three years ago, he received a letter from a woman who had worked with Lehrhaupt and knew the link between her and the director. “It was very sad,” Linklater says. “On Mother’s Day 1994, three months before we went to Vienna to shoot *Before Sunrise*, Amy was killed in a motorbike accident. She wasn’t alive when we shot the first movie.”

Hawke, who writes the films with Linklater and Delpy, told the director: “On the one hand I feel like crying, on the other if you hadn’t met her we wouldn’t have met. She brought us together.”

Linklater says that “Amy’s life was so



**Top: Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy in *Before Midnight*. Above: Richard Linklater; Hawke and Delpy in *Before Sunrise*. Left, Jack Black in *Bernie***

brief; she was such an alive person”. He doesn’t think their relationship was “the one”, he’s not sure if he fell in love with her that night, but it was “special”. He has a “more of the random, shit happens view of the world”, describing himself as romantic and cynical, with a “melancholic comedic tragic view of the world. I’m an old-school existentialist”.

Filmed in Greece, *Before Midnight* finds Jesse and Celine in their forties with children, unmarried and questioning if they are “enough” for one another. Infidelity and commitment issues swirl. The first film earned Linklater scores of letters from moviegoers, especially older ones, who’d had their own fleeting encounters. The third will make couples in long-term relationships squirm.

Linklater’s view of himself as an old-school existentialist is brilliantly apparent in his other new film, *Bernie*. Based on a true story, this is a black comedy told with a poker-straight face. It shows how the warped relationship between Bernie Tiede, a much-loved smalltown Texas undertaker (Jack Black) and the rich, abusive Helena Nugent (Shirley Maclaine) leads him to murder her. The town rushes, warmly and perversely, to his defence. Black visited the real Tiede in jail, while the famously spiritualist Maclaine, Linklater laughs, “communed every night with the real Miss Nugent”.

Linklater is steeped in his native Texas. He’s directed his movies here and was raised between his mother’s home in Huntsville and his father’s more than 750 miles away in Houston. The only child in his class with

divorced parents, Linklater says it wasn’t scarring. “It’s better to have parents happier apart than sadder together. They were good parents and still are.” He is a lapsed Catholic, after his mother told the Church to “f\*\*\* off” when it stopped her acquiring birth control. “I’m so grateful not to have grown up in that guilt-riddled world,” he says. Linklater grew up “like any horny kid”, reading *Playboy* and kissing “around 100 girls” before he was 15, which was about when he lost his virginity. As a teen he was a weekend marijuana user. These days he enjoys “the odd brownie. People are surprised, given some of my films, by how little of a druggo guy I am, but I like the culture. It was film that became my compulsion.”

He shot movies with a Super 8 camera, influenced by movies such as *A Clockwork Orange*, *Chinatown*, *Eraserhead* and *Raging Bull*. His first film, *It’s Impossible to Learn to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), preceded *Slacker* (1991), his first widely distributed movie.

“Studios have financed four of my [23] films. I don’t have a problem with Hollywood, but the air we breathe here isn’t permeated by business. My family life is here.”

Linklater is unmarried (“I am anti-institutional in every area of my life”). He and Tina, his partner of 20 years, have three much-cherished daughters — 19-year-old Lorelei, an actress, and the 8-year-old “fascinating” identical twins Charlotte and Alina. “That’s a big gap between children,” he says. “Tina said: ‘I want more kids and if you don’t I’ll go have them with someone else,’” Linklater laughs.

He quotes a statistic that 70 per cent of married men and 72 per cent of married women have strayed. Is he one of the monogamous ones? “No, of course not!” he roars. “Anyone who wants to be with me has to accept the complexity of being a human. I try not to live in a straitjacket.”

**“Of course I’m not monogamous. I try not to live in a straitjacket”**

I also try not to hurt anybody or cause pain to my loved ones and kids.”

He says he would like to make a “big sex comedy one day. There’s very little sex in my movies, so when I do a movie about sex there will be a lot.”

Mortality stalks Linklater whimsically: on a grave-finding website he came across François Truffaut’s, “who died at 52. I’m 52 but feel like I’m only halfway through my body of work.”

He relishes “the architecture” of storytelling; how a Greek chorus of gossips in *Bernie* forms the film’s linchpin. He says that “rule No 1 of film is show it, don’t say it” a rule he, the instinctive rebel, contravenes with speech-heavy scripts. His next project, starring Hawke again, this time with Rosanna Arquette, is the fruition of 11 years of film-making that follows a boy to teenager-dom.

There have been nine-year gaps between the *Before* films, and Linklater would like to make a fourth when Jesse and Celine reach another milestone: 50. They “should be together,” he thinks. Their love is Linklater’s notion of love: it exists, but the roses come studded with complex, mysterious thorns.

He’s done *Sunrise*, *Sunset* and *Midnight*: what’s left in the day, title-wise? “I think we’ll have to jump to seasons,” he smiles.

**Bernie is released on Apr 26. Before Midnight is out on Jun 21**



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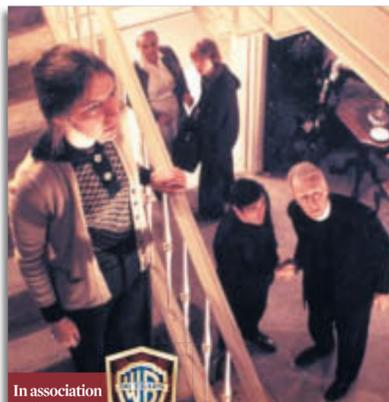
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