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REVIEWS

Jan. 31, 2005

Swimmers

By James Greenberg

PARK CITY -- Before Miramax brought independent film to the multiplex and Sundance made it a national sport, American independent cinema was about regional filmmaking. Small, well-told stories rooted in a specific time and place. A rocky coming-of-age tale set along the Maryland coast, "Swimmers" is that kind of film.

Mature audiences looking for a deeply-felt, human-scale story should be given the chance to enjoy this one in theaters.

More than anything, "Swimmers" is a realistic and loving portrait of a twelve-year-old girl's inner life. Emma Tyler (Tara Devon Gallagher) is, in her father's words, a peeler--a young crab that is shedding its shell before moving on to the next stage of growth. Unfortunately, Emma's serene if not particularly joyful life hits a snag when she develops an ear problem that calls for a costly operation.

Living off the water in the Chesapeake Bay is at best a precarious business. Emma's father Will (Robert Knott) fishes for crabs and oysters but changing economics and environmental conditions make it a losing proposition. A strong, silent type, he is predictably driven to drink by his shortcomings, which leaves the work of keeping the family together and finding money to the matriarch Julia (Cherry Jones).

Perhaps because it's a region that has not been seen a lot on film, it is easy to feel the beauty as well as the hardship of life here. As her family situation worsens, Emma makes friends with Merrill (Sarah Paulson), a highly strung young woman with a troubled past who has just returned to town. The two form a bond based on old suffering and new respect. Sarah is the kind of strange presence we meet in movies who comes into someone's life and leaves. Dark and given to manic bouts of depression, Sarah is an intriguing character who could have used a bit more backstory.

The complications of the plot are not surprising and almost besides the point. Emma's brother Clyde (Sean Hatosy) falls for Sarah; that doesn't work out. There's bad blood between Clyde and Emma's other brother Mike (Michael Mosley) and the two come to blows. And Julia and Will's marriage is threatened. Emma's one sanctuary had always been her love of swimming, but now with her ear problem, she can't even do that. In one way or another, everyone's life here is dependent on the water.

What really makes "Swimmers" special are the small touches rather than the big dramatic flourishes. Writer/director Doug Sadler somehow gets inside the head of a twelve-year-old girl and manages to communicate her dreams and fears. And it's the wonderful performances that make these people come alive.

Bottom line: New locale gives familiar material a fresh feel.

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Gallagher, in her film debut, is soulful without being sappy, and Jones as her mother turns in her usual nuanced work. She can show more with a crease of the brow than most actors can with a page of dialogue. Veteran character actor Knott captures the darkness and light and quicksilver personality of a man at his wit's end. Beautiful work all around.

These are not just characters who were plopped down in an unusual location because someone thought it would be an interesting place to shoot a movie. They belong here and their lives are part of the environment. Rodney Taylor's sensitive photography captures the uniqueness of the place but also the harshness as seen through a young girl's eyes. Although the story is familiar, the specifics make you feel like you've been taken someplace new.

SWIMMERS

Damage Control Filmproduction, Horizon Global Productions, Quasiworld Entertainment

Credits:

Director: Doug Sadler

Writer: Sadler

Producers: Melanie Backer, David W. Leitner, Michael Yanko

Executive producer: Ophira Dagan, Lisa Green

Director of photography: Rodney Taylor

Production designer: Mark White

Music: Paul Cantelon, David Darling

Co-producer: Daniel Bickel

Costume designer: Ane Crabtree

Editors: Lilah Bankier, Affonso Goncalves, Susan Korda.

Cast:

Emma: Tara Devon Gallagher

Julia: Cherry Jones

Will: Robert Knott

Clyde: Shawn Hatosy

Merrill: Sarah Paulson

Mike: Michael Mosley

Shellie: Kate Goehring

No MPAA rating

Running time -- 90 minutes

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