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Toronto Film Fest Reviews

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Venice

Wetlands

Marecages
(Canada)

By BOYD VAN HOEIJ

A Metropole Films Distribution release of a Fortissimo Films presentation of a Max Films production, with the participation of Telefilm Canada. (International sales: Fortissimo Films, Amsterdam.) Produced by Luc Vandal, Felize Frappier. Executive producer, Roger Frappier. Directed, written by Guy Edoin.

With: Pascale Bussiers, Gabriel Maille, Luc Picard, Francois Papineau, Angele Coutu, Denise Dubois. (French dialogue)



Pascale Bussiers in "Wetlands"

Sustaining a crop and dairy farm is hard work, but keeping a family together might be even harder in "Wetlands," the quietly impressive helming debut of French-Canadian filmmaker Guy Edoin. A dual character study of a Quebec farmer's wife and her saturnine teenage son, plagued by misfortune, this deliberately paced, multilayered pic looks at the difficulty of contempo farming while simultaneously exploring less tangible issues, including mourning, forgiveness and sexual identity, through the prism of a rocky mother-son relationship. Venice and Toronto preems should inspire sales, especially in Francophone Europe and ancillary. It bows locally Oct. 14.

In an early scene, ruggedly handsome Quebec farmer Jean (Luc Picard) and his equally sensual yet earthy other half, Marie (Pascale Bussiers), call on their sullen 17-year-old son, Simon (Gabriel Maille), to help them with the delivery of a calf. But despite their best efforts, the animal suffocates and dies before it's out of its mother's womb.

Impressively staged scene already signals Edoin's carefully constructed yet deceptively simple narrative style, which works on two levels. First, there's a clear commitment to showing the grim everyday details of modern-day agriculture and, through these details, suggesting how much hard work goes into something fraught with potential disaster every step of the way (the summer heat affecting the family's crops is another constant threat).

Second, the scene also works on a symbolic level, foreshadowing one of the story's major leitmotifs: accidental death. As the pic progresses, it emerges that Simon had a younger brother who drowned when he was under his supervision, and about a half-hour in, Jean is fatally hurt in an accident that also involves his son.

Pic's remaining 80 minutes chart the difficult relationship between a mourning mother, who has to run a nearly bankrupt farm on her own and can't help but blame Simon for much of the misery in her life, and her offspring, who is dealing with the usual adolescent growing pains as well as his grief and sense of guilt.

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It's almost impossible for Simon to assert his independence in this situation, especially once his mother accepts the help of a roughneck (Francois Papineau) who seems intent on wooing her. The benign presence of his paternal grandmother (Denise Dubois), who shares her life with another woman (Angele Coutu), at least shows the teen that his interest in boys is not something out of the ordinary. Typically, Edoin leaves it up to the viewer to infer this kind of information, which means some of the subtler allusions will pass less attentive auds by.

Pic never becomes a weeping widow's tale or a coming-out narrative; instead, it's predicated on the symbiosis between the stories of mother and son. Since their characters aren't big talkers, a lot falls on Bussiers and young Maille, who both inhabit their roles fully. Supporting cast is also solid, especially Picard in the key role of the father, whose absence is sorely felt for the rest of the film.

Impeccable craft contributions include d.p. Serge Desrosiers' lush widescreen photography in velvety greens, blues and yellows. Ending is beautifully shot and, in its symmetry and irony, perfectly written. Location work was done on Edoin's family farm.

Camera (color, widescreen), Serge Desrosiers; editor, Mathieu Bouchard-Malo; music, Nathalie Boileau, Pierre Derochers; production designer, Andre-Line Beauparlant; costume designer, Julia Patkos; sound (Dolby Digital), Yann Cleary, Claude Beauregard, Stephane Bergeron; assistant director, Danielle Lapointe; casting, Marie-Jan Seille. Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Critics' Week), Sept. 2, 2011. (Also in Toronto Film Festival -- Canada First!) Running time: 111 MIN.

Contact Boyd van Hoeij at news@variety.com

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