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Shirley Adams -- Film Review

By Ray Bennett, August 12, 2009 05:18 ET



"Shirley Adams"

Bottom Line: Outstanding portrait of a mother with a performance by lead actress Denise Newman that will be hard to better.

Locarno Film Festival

LOCARNO, Switzerland -- An extraordinary performance by veteran South African actress Denise Newman will set the bar for best actress awards this year if Oliver Hermanus' "Shirley Adams" wins the worldwide audiences it deserves.

The subtitle of the film is "Portrait of a Mother," and it is just that with Newman as an exhausted, devoted and indomitable single mother taking care of her son who is a paraplegic after being shot in a gang fight by an unnamed assailant.

The film is set in Cape Town, but it could just as easily be Brixton or Watts or any other cityscape where mindless violence has young people in its grip. The universality of the tale, written by Hermanus and Stavros Pemballis, makes the film fully accessible, and the contemplative nature of its storytelling, without cinematic tricks or melodrama, will win praise everywhere.

Produced by disaster-movie specialist Roland Emmerich, "Shirley" could not be further removed from such pics as "The Day After Tomorrow" or "2012," but his big-time connections might ensure that this small film is seen far and wide.

Hermanus uses Jamie Ramsay's unfussy cinematography to convey the claustrophobia of the characters' lives with many close-ups of the mother as she bathes, clothes and feeds her stricken son, Donovan (Keenan Arrison), and sees to mundane daily chores.

Bitter at having become what he terms "a cripple," Donovan wants nothing more than to kill himself despite his mother's earnest attempts to make sure he gets proper food and medication. Life is not easy in the post-apartheid world of South Africa, however, and with little money and strict rules she faces an uphill battle.

She also is resentful when a blond and perky social worker arrives to help her care for her son. Tamsin (Emily Childs) is a vegan with very sensible notions of how things should be done, recommending that Donovan be fed fresh fruit and fish. Broke and exhausted, Shirley explodes, "Do you see any fish around here?"

The visitor perseveres, however, even though when she asks Donovan how she can please him, he asks her to take off her shirt, and she sets out to prove she really can offer assistance.

The relentlessness of Donovan's helplessness is depicted without sentiment, and the grave determination of his mother is conveyed constantly across Newman's magnificently expressive features. When the identity of the boy who shot Donovan is revealed, it only adds to her already heavy burden.

Deliberate but not slow and melancholy but not depressing, "Shirley" is a penetrating study in fortitude and optimism in the face of desperate odds.

Production: Centropolis Entertainment, Dv8 Films, London Film School

Cast: Denise Newman, Keenan Arrison, Emily Childs, Theresa C. Sedras, Lee-Ann van Rooi

Director-screenwriter: Oliver Hermanus

Screenwriter: Stavros Pamballis

Producers: Jeremy Nathan, Michelle Wheatley

Executive producer: Roland Emmerich

Director of photography: Jamie Ramsay

Production designer: Nick Mostert

Music: Philip Miller

Costume designer: Maleen Nokel


Editor: Garreth Fradgley

No rating, 91 minutes

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