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Family drama a modest but genuine 'Pearl'

Hickory director King scores with conflict set in land of Mennonites

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Movie Critic

What was the last movie you saw that took religion seriously, presented both sides of a dramatic argument, and came down in the middle without insulting anyone's faith or intelligence? The *next* one should be "Pearl Diver," now at the Manor.

I mention the theater because Regal Entertainment has booked a full-week run, one of a handful given to a local filmmaker in my 20 years as a critic at the Observer. Writer-director Sidney King comes from Hickory; if this feature gets attention from the right people who have money, he'll go other places soon.

I first saw it at the Asheville Film Festival in 2005, where I was judging features, and remembered it as an earnest and endearing first film. On second viewing last week, I thought it had more weight. It suffers from small drawbacks most beginners encounter -- tighter budget than desired, inability to step back and see some holes in the story -- but it's an accomplished debut.

It was shot and is set mostly around a Mennonite community in Goshen, Ind. It's about sisters Hannah (Joey Honsa) and Marian (Amy Jean Johnson), whose mother was murdered about 20 years before by burglars mistakenly seeking a necklace.

Hannah grew to be a Chicago-based writer who never got over the incident and wants to write a revealing memoir. Marian married a farmer, remained in her town and her church, and wants to keep family business private. Even after her daughter suffers a disfiguring accident, Marian refuses to accept money from Hannah's book sale; she and her husband would rather sell their farm than profit by public exposure.

Non-Mennonites may have a hard time (as I did) believing that it's OK to accept insurance money to cover a hospital stay but not OK to sue the insurance company if full coverage is denied. (This is presented as a religious decision, rather than a personal one.) But King respects the Mennonites in his film and takes care to present both Marian and Hannah's points of view thoughtfully.

He foreshadows carefully, setting up events that might seem coincidental. Though the ending is improbable, it's also a crowd-pleaser: An immigrant farmer named Isaac, who has hung around the fringes of the story, suddenly plays a crucial role. (He's irresistible Yevgeni Lazarev, reportedly the first Soviet actor cast as Stanley Kowalski).

The film's pace is slow, though not draggy, so we get extra time to study the actors; they range from ideal (Lazarev) to solid (Honsa and Johnson) to fair (Christopher Collard, who plays Isaac's son).

We also get plenty of time to absorb the handsome cinematography of Morganton native John Rotan, who pulls off some lovely shots of sunsets and country churches. King clearly loves his subject, and Rotan helps translate this love into memorable imagery.

REVIEW

Pearl Diver

Sisters take different paths after their mother's murder and are brought together by another family tragedy.

STARS: Joey Honsa, Amy Jean Johnson, Yevgeni Lazarev.

WRITER-DIRECTOR: Sidney King.

LENGTH: 98 minutes.

RATING: Unrated (brief violence)