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Scott Thomas Uncovers Sinister Secret; 'Another Earth': Movies

By Rick Winner - Jul 20, 2011

In a summer season filled with gargantuan robots, warring mutants and a green superhero, along comes a movie to remind us that there's no substitute for great human drama.

Despite its ethereal title and "Twilight Zone" aura, "[Another Earth](#)" is at heart a story about damaged people trying to connect with each other and the world around them. A small film that looks at the big picture, it offers an intensely personal vision of awe and wonder.

The movie brilliantly intertwines stories about the discovery of a planet that mirrors Earth and a young woman's quest for redemption following a tragic accident. The credit goes to first-time feature director Mike Cahill and Brit Marling, who co-wrote the screenplay with Cahill and stars in the film.

Marling gives an achingly raw performance as Rhoda, whose dreams of becoming an astrophysicist are destroyed when she gets drunk and crashes her car into another vehicle. The collision kills a mother and her young son and severely injures the father (William Mapother, matching Marling's brooding mood), a composer and music professor at a local college.

Released after four years in prison, Rhoda moves back in with her parents and takes a menial job as a high-school janitor. She yearns to apologize to the survivor, John, who has become a recluse in his dilapidated country house.

Space Trip

Instead, she ends up becoming his housekeeper without revealing her true identity. The decision backfires after their relationship turns romantic and she enters an essay contest offering the winner a free spaceship ride to visit a doppelganger on the other Earth.

The movie includes a couple of unforgettable scenes. One takes place in a college classroom, where John plays a saw whose eerie spiritual sound evokes a Gregorian chant. In the other, Rhoda confesses her role in the accident to John through a teary parable.

Cahill shot the film with the same hand-held cameras he has used for several documentaries, making “Another Earth” as intimate as possible. The glimpses of Earth 2 are low-tech but highly effective.

Two other notable contributions are the eclectic soundtrack by the indie rock band Fall on Your Sword and the eccentric narration by NASA astrophysicist Richard Berendzen, who delivers godlike pronouncements about the nature of the universe.

“Another Earth,” from [Fox Searchlight Pictures](#), opens tomorrow in New York and [Los Angeles](#). Rating: ****

‘Sarah’s Key’

In the summer of 1942, French police rounded up 13,000 Parisian Jews and herded most of them into a cycling stadium, where they were held for several days in sweltering heat with little access to water, food or medical aid. Almost all the prisoners were eventually shipped to concentration camps and killed.

The Vel’ d’hiv Roundup is the centerpiece of “[Sarah’s Key](#),” a searching drama about Julia, an American journalist in Paris (Kristin Scott Thomas) whose investigation into those mass arrests uncovers a dark secret about her husband’s family.

Director Gilles Paquet-Brenner switches back and forth between 1942 and 2009, when Julia, her workaholic husband (Frederic Pierrot) and their teenage daughter are about to move to an apartment inherited from the husband’s grandparents.

Bilingual Actress

While researching her article, the writer learns that the grandparents moved into the building just after the roundup, supplanting a Jewish family forced from their home. The parents and their 10-year-old daughter Sarah (Melusine Mayance) were taken to the stadium, but the girl locked her younger brother in a closet to hide him from the captors.

The film, based on the best-selling novel by Tatiana de Rosnay, follows Julia as she digs into Sarah’s life (Aidan Quinn has a small role as her grown son) and learns about her ultimate fate.

Scott Thomas, who lives in Paris, flawlessly alternates between French and English while adeptly balancing the present and past. But Mayance’s mature, clear-eyed performance as the young Sarah is the one to savor.