



Stranger Things

Writers-directors Burke and Eyal show a genuine gift for visual storytelling and emotional catharsis.

By JOHN ANDERSON

In delicate, dignified, soulful "Stranger Things," writers-directors Eleanor Burke and Ron Eyal show a genuine gift for visual storytelling and emotion. Like its diverse characters, this festival fave, which focuses on the relationship between a lonely woman and a homeless man, should find love, perhaps on arthouse circuit, certainly on VOD/DVD.

Shot on the English seaside and with a Dreyer-esque instinct for the complexity and frankness of the human face, the pic is essentially a two-hander, its action muted and its pretensions modest. At the same time, its theme -- the capacity of the heart to make connections, under odd and unlikely circumstances -- harbors something titanic. Much of this is conveyed via the directors' appreciation for revealing detail, and eloquent gesture.

Oona (Bridget Collins) has come back to settle her late mother's affairs, at the cottage she kept near the ocean. Upon arriving, Oona assesses the environs with both a weary and guilty eye: The place is a mess, bordering on the squalid, indicating Oona hasn't been there lately, that she neglected her mother, that the elder woman wasn't equipped for living alone and that the relationship between mother and daughter -- who, we will learn, certainly has the capacity for caring -- was best served by distance. Burke and Eyal tell us this with such graceful economy it imparts a sort of joy, even though one of the things they show us quite plainly is that Oona is a woman alone.

But not for long: Mani (Adeel Akhtar), a homeless man, mistakenly assumes Oona's house is empty, and is discovered and chased off by a frightened Oona. Her fear passes quickly -- Mani has dropped a sketchbook, which reveals his considerable artistic talent -- and just as quickly her compassion comes to the fore: She tracks Mani down, invites him to stay in a smaller structure behind her house (a childish "Oona" is scrawled on the door). Slowly, warily but deliberately, they gravitate toward friendship -- although mutual salvation may be a more accurate term.

Conflicts arise -- Mani has an allegiance to street life that prove problematic, for instance -- but the thrust of "Stranger Things" is pure humanity.

Both Akhtar and Collins exude intelligence and suggest a rare kind of inner life. Burke's camera allows a great deal of dramatic leeway, and both thesps take full advantage: One of the assets of "Stranger Things" is its air of mystery, and the actors give the indelible impression that they have much locked away inside.

Tech credits are good, especially Burke's intuitive, expressive camera work.

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