



'Islander'

Written by Laurel Brauns

Wednesday, 29 November 2006

a story of hope in minor key

There is a profound sense of place that underscores the breathtaking cinematography and literate plot line of Thomas Hildreth's "Islander." Produced by Down East Films and directed by Ian McCrudden, the movie is shot on location in Vinalhaven, a small fishing and summer community 15 miles off the coast of Maine. A bulbous landform carved out by glaciers, the island is known for its hardscrabble year-round residents who mined the granite for centuries. It now supports less than half of its peak population, and the natives who remain are inextricably tied to each other and the resources they rely on for survival. Eben Cole's story unfolds here, his plight to persevere as a lobsterman and his struggle for redemption in an insular society. As he says at the end of the movie, "They say you can pick your friends, but not your relatives. On an island, we're all related. Whether we like to think so or not."

After inheriting a coveted fishing license from his father, Cole has carved out a modest life, with a wife and adoring daughter. When a mainlander encroaches on his lobster trap territory, the short-fused Cole lashes out at his competitor and winds up in Knox County Jail for five years, leaving his family ashamed, angered and abandoned on the small island. His wife refuses to visit him and his father dies of a stroke, but still Cole returns to Vinalhaven after being released from prison, only to find the word "killer" spray painted on his house. What follows is Cole's struggle to win back the affection of his daughter and his own self respect.

Cole is played by Thomas Hildreth, a Maine native who also wrote and co-produced the film. Hildreth was a frequent summer resident on Vinalhaven as a child, and his grandfather was governor of Maine in the late 1940s. The veracity of the dialogue and the grace of Hildreth's characterization of his protagonist is indicative of the compassionate kinship that Hildreth holds for the people and places of his childhood. From his beginnings as the inflamed fisherman who can easily infuriate anyone who crosses his path, to his final development as a sensitive father who tells artless stories to his teenaged daughter while skipping stones in the quarry, Hildreth portrays Cole so authentically that one is left thinking no other person could have fit the role.

Across the board, the depictions of local colloquialisms and wry humor are captured with meticulous attention; several Vinalhaven natives were even hired as cast. This quality sets the film apart from other Hollywood productions in which New Englanders are condescendingly portrayed as caricatures spewing forth workaday clichés. If this film's only success is creating a veritable document of an old world culture that is on the verge of extinction, that is a major accomplishment.

Despite its name, Down East Films is based in Hollywood, and therefore we are treated to the formulaic placement of a sex scene and a murder sequence within the first 15 minutes of the movie. Also, a few actors and actresses fall out of tune with the starkly rural setting, intruding on some of the otherwise convincing performances. Amy Jo Johnson, as Cole's southy Boston wife Cheryl, never fully slips into her role as the weak, opportunist woman everyone loves to hate. And Cole's rival Jimmy, played by Mark Kiely, vacillates between a Down East, middle-American and even British accent during some of his more high adrenaline moments.

While the tone and setting will surely recall the 2001 drama "In the Bedroom," set in Rockland, Maine, "Islander" does not switch its focus to courtroom drama and

legal proceedings midway through the saga. Instead, it maintains a melody of hope in minor key, suggesting that the possibility of renewal stirs within us all.

In the end, the island itself becomes the most memorable character. Aerial shots of the jagged gray-green shore are dramatized by the Celtic-tinged music of Billy Mallery, creating the feeling that the island is perched on the edge of the world. Stunning scenes of moored boats at sunset and hidden enclaves incandescent with moonlight are poetically placed, producing an undercurrent of deep-rooted nostalgia for a fading culture.

“Islander” is a lighthouse in the capricious sea of independent film: a distinctly American tale illustrated with ease and allure. It may well become a home library classic for those who treasure dark New England stories.