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Wisconsin Film Festival: '32A' a mature take on adolescence

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The Irish coming-of-age film "32A" follows four friends as they struggle into adulthood. - Promotional

A coming-of-age story about four young girls struggling with family, romance and each other is not a particularly original story. But the Irish film "32A," which played at Orpheum Theater Friday night as part of the Wisconsin Film Festival, manages to give it a poignant, pretty makeover.

Set in 1979, the film centers on Maeve Brennan, a 13-year-old girl from a relatively wholesome Irish family. Maeve begins experiencing several hallmarks of adolescence -- from bodily changes to first kisses to first betrayals -- at a rapid pace. The changes initially set her apart from her three closest friends, who demonstrate a mix of jealousy and concern that both causes the initial rift and helps mend it when Maeve finds herself alone not too long into the film. The plot weaves the pieces of many of coming-of-age films together, forming a story that is new but not unfamiliar. Writer and director Marian Quinn occasionally relies on tenuous stereotypes about the lives of young girls, but ultimately gives a serviceably realistic representation of adolescence.

Where the movie really shines, however, is in the details of acting and setting. Maeve is played by Ailish McCarthy, who shows an impressive range for a first-time actress. She offers moments of perfect agony and anger, but most often aptly portrays the wide-eyed, passive look of a girl going through many things for the first time.

McCarthy and Sophie Jo Wasson, who plays Maeve's best friend, Ruth, are the dramatic heart of the film. While Maeve is experiencing many of the more typical moments of adolescence, Wasson convinces as a girl already far closer to adulthood, who sees the return of her father and works to understand the abusive relationship he shared with her mother.

Both girls' experiences are given nearly equal dramatic treatment, highlighting the scope of events that can shape lives, but Quinn also shows off an impeccable sense of comedic timing. From the girls' preoccupation with guessing the bra sizes of older women to the appearance and re-appearance of a serial flasher who torments the nuns at the girls' Catholic school, Quinn saves the film from becoming melodramatic with well-timed levity.

Most of all, though, the film is beautifully done. The setting plays up the colors of the era, from rich olive green walls to bright floral clothing, and it is filled with details like the daily delivery of milk, the showing of "Saturday Night Fever" in Ireland and the use of music from Elvis Costello and Blondie that place the viewer close to the film's 1979 setting. Cinematographer P.J. Dillon allows the viewer to revel in these scenes, letting the camera linger on scenes with an interesting perspective or focus.

Talented acting and vibrant scenery make a story that could easily veer into caricature ring true. "32A" is a pleasant film that gives a time-tested plot a fresh, but still relatable look.