

Feature With The Preacher

Friday September 9th at 6:55 at the Bytowne Cinema



Terri, starring newcomer Jacob Wysocki and John C. Reilly, is a lovely lyrical ode to high school misfits and the adults they grow into.

Wysocki is Terri, a lumbering pudge of a guy who despite his towering size is a favorite target of those high school boys who run in packs and are both bullies and jerks. By the time we meet Terri and his tormenters, he's taken to wearing pyjamas to school simply because, as he tells Mr. Fitzgerald (Reilly), the vice principal in charge of the troubled and tortured, they're more comfortable.

Even beyond the weight, Terri's is not an easy lot. He's parentless, though we're not sure why, and living with an uncle (Creed Bratton), who is losing a battle with disease and dementia. At school, when

he's not being bullied, Terri is isolated in his insecurity. A mess of contradictions, he is sometimes childlike and sometimes mature. That you're never sure which way Terri will handle a given situation is a tribute to the strength of the storytelling here.

Director Jacobs and screenwriter deWitt use Terri's circumstances to circle a series of serious, and seriously uncomfortable, issues. DeWitt captures the way people talk about a problem without talking about a problem as he works his way through obesity, kids as caretakers, the emotional price of neglect, peer pressure, sex and drugs with an unvarnished honesty that is bracing.

It's potent stuff, laced with smart, sensitive humour, and extremely well handled by Wysocki and the excellent ensemble of young actors that become Terri's intimates, especially Bridger Zadina as Chad, a hair-pulling live wire always on the verge of a meltdown, and Olivia Crocicchia as Heather, the pretty girl with problems. Jacobs and cinematographer Tobias Datum add another layer, giving a naturalist beauty to this broken world.

John C. Reilly is exactly the right guy to play a grown-up who's a little off-center himself, unconventional in his approach but so genuinely decent that you understand why students gravitate to him. In a sense, his vice principal stands as the archetype of that teacher whose power rests in the mere fact that they're emotionally there. Reilly brings such nuance to the undercurrent of the slightly outrageous that he keeps Mr. Fitzgerald crackling fresh and constantly surprising.

But Wysocki carries the film. He's the embodiment of teenage strength and weakness. By turns tough and soft, serious and silly, needy and self-sufficient, Terri is not always easy to like, but impossible not to love.

– Betsy Sharkey, Los Angeles Time