

Movie Review: 'The Life Before Her Eyes'

by Nina Garin

What do you say about an illusive drama like "The Life Before Her Eyes" when you have no idea what's actually happening?

At its simplest, "The Life Before Her Eyes" is about a high school shooting in which the gunman forces two best friends to choose which one of them will die.

'THE LIFE BEFORE HER EYES' - Evan Rachel Wood and Eva Amurri are best friends facing terror in 'The Life Before Her Eyes.' CNS Photo courtesy of Phillip Caruso / Magnolia Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Evan Rachel Wood plays Diana, a mildly rebellious teen who is always searching for something. No matter how many boys she dates or joints she smokes, she only seems at peace when she's with her best friend, Maureen (Eva Amurri).

Diana and Maureen have a relationship they describe as "the virgin and the whore," and thanks to outstanding performances by the young actresses, the movie is at its best when exploring their unlikely friendship.

Then we have Uma Thurman as Diana 15 years later. She's a fragile mom, practically crippled with guilt, trying not to have a meltdown on the anniversary of the shooting.

"The Life Before Her Eyes," like the novel it's based on, unfolds like a dream, and Diana's character seems to have visions - visions of her dead teacher and of blood where there is none.

There are constant flashbacks and flash-forwards, but neither device is concrete or reliable. Slowly, it becomes obvious that things aren't as they seem.

Even on a visual level, a movie about a school shooting, filled with the nightmarish sounds of screaming and gunfire, shouldn't be beautiful. But director Vadim Perelman packs in glorious, languid shots of flowers and pollen and sunshine.

Thurman is initially stilted and awkward, and you suspect this is yet another role she's phoning in, like that of "G-Girl" in "My Super Ex-Girlfriend." But ultimately she delivers one of her strongest, most vulnerable performances in a while. Especially in scenes where she's chasing her 8-year-old daughter, who has runaway tendencies.

All this leads to a surprise ending, but it's not an obvious surprise, the jaw-dropping kind you get in "The Crying Game" or "The Sixth Sense."

A film this vague may be annoying to anyone who likes nice, neat conclusions. Because even after the credits roll, you're still putting pieces together, still wondering what's real and what's not.

But in this 24-hour news world, in which we're numbed by headlines of school violence, a new perspective such as that offered by this film, helps humanize such tragedies.

Either way, the only clear thing about "The Life Before Her Eyes" is that it lingers, whether you want it to or not.

"The Life Before Her Eyes." Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Rated: R. 3 stars.

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