

Movie Review: 'Gracie'

by David_Elliott

"Gracie" seems a formula sports inspiration movie, except it isn't. It scores a goal right through the net of cliché.

The core of why is in the how. "Gracie" has the values of a real family. It was a project of actress Elisabeth Shue ("Leaving Las Vegas") and brothers Andrew and John, who produced with her. It is dedicated to brother Will, a 1970s soccer prodigy who died in 1988.

'GRACIE' - Dermot Mulroney and Carly Schroeder star in the sports drama 'Gracie.' CNS Photo courtesy of K.C. Bailey. It's the story of Gracie Bowen, a girl whose soccer-mad brother dies in an accident. This is reasonably close to Elisabeth Shue, who grew up among brothers and fell hard for the game herself, once dreaming of playing it big time until beauty and talent took her elsewhere.

The Shues grew up in middle-class New Jersey, and the film takes place there. In a few shots, N.J. even seems "the garden state." But the Bowen house is fairly hardscrabble urban, dad and soccer nut Bryan (Dermot Mulroney) working as a Mayflower Co. hauler, and mom Lindsay (Shue) a school nurse.

The story is how Gracie comes up from envious rooter to being, against dad's initial will, the replacement for her dead brother, the family's anointed star. The female writers and director David Guggenheim make sure that her effort to win acceptance (and learn the game) stays closer to Shue's history than to conventional movie rah-rah.

Gracie's hurdle is that there is no girls' team at the high school, most of the boys think a girl is laughable in "real" sports, and she nearly blows her hopes both on and off the field. She has to play with tough boys eager to show her up, but her mom (who doesn't much care for soccer) realizes what is at stake for her only daughter.

Elisabeth Shue is subtle and fine. Brother Andrew Shue, also of "Melrose Place," is ace as the team coach. Mulroney is a good hard guy ready to melt. Kid brothers, male players and coaches all ring true.

The topper that really seals the deal is the casting of Carla Schroeder as Gracie. She is entirely genuine, physically and emotionally. When Aretha Franklin's "Rock Steady" roars in during a practice session, it seems just the roter that Schroeder merits. Of course, there must be a big game climax, but getting there has a highly credible zigzag of suspense.

"Gracie" is no masterwork like "Offside," the recent Iranian film about girls and soccer and male prejudice. But that's an ensemble work of art from a great director, Jafar Panahi.

RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) This more homespun film doesn't let down its story or the Shue family. Its plain integrity outshines predictability. It is feminist without cant. And Schroeder delivers perhaps the finest young female performance of the year.

A Picturehouse release. Director: Davis Guggenheim. Writers: Lisa Marie Petersen, Karen Janszen. Cast: Carla Schroeder, Elisabeth Shue, Dermot Mulroney, Jesse Lee Soffer, Andrew Shue. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

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