Film Close-Up: Elisabeth Shue

by Joey_Berlin

"Gracie" draws its power from its stirring story, which is based on the life of one of the film's stars, actress Elisabeth Shue. Both a touching coming-of-age story and an inspirational sports movie, "Gracie" stars the terrifically talented Carly Schroeder as a version of Shue when she was a teenager. She is a tomboy in a soccer-mad North Jersey family, and after the accidental death of a beloved older brother, she decides to try out for the boy's soccer team.

ELISABETH SHUE - Elisabeth Shue is seen here with Carly Schroeder and Dermot Mulroney in a scene from 'Gracie.' CNS Photo courtesy of K.C. Bailey. Shue, 43, co-stars in "Gracie" as a version of her own mother and she also co-produced the picture with her brother Andrew, who plays a coach. Shue's husband, Davis Guggenheim, directed this heartfelt family affair.

So how does the story of Gracie differ from the story of Elisabeth?

Shue says that 85 percent of the story is authentic, especially what it was like to be the only girl in a family of three brothers, to play soccer on boy's teams for four years, to try to get her father to pay attention to her and be treated as an equal. Of course, the film leaves out Shue's adult life as a movie star, including her debut in "The Karate Kid" followed by roles in the "Back to the Future" sequels, her Oscar-nominated turn in "Leaving Las Vegas" and many other memorable movies.

Q: You returned to your hometown, Maplewood, N.J., and your old high school, Columbia High, to film "Gracie." That must have been extraordinarily strange.

A: It was fun actually. You really don't need an excuse to go back and live in your old hometown. I really enjoyed it. Davis Guggenheim, my husband, directed it and he really wanted to get close to home to be really authentic. He thought it would force us to feel the past in a really intense way, and he was right.

Q: Did Davis spend much time with you back home?

A: Yes. He had a whole new perspective on the story when he came home to meet my family in our old home. It was a broken-down Victorian home that we couldn't take care of. Anyway, when we came to the door I forgot to introduce him to my father, so I just left him on his own with my father. And then when dinner came, we all passed around a big bowl of spaghetti and when the bowl came to him, there was none left. And no one in the family even cared to go get him, our guest, more spaghetti. In my family, if you didn't step up you'd get left behind. In my family, the boys would eat all the cereal and never care if there was none for me.

Q: Your brother's death was different than in the story though, right?

A: Yes. It did happen later, but my brother was the star of the soccer team and he did wear the number seven. It's something that can change your life in both positive and difficult ways. But if he had died when I was younger, I do feel that I would have become the first girl to play on a boy's varsity soccer team if I'd kept at it. I didn't have the guts at the time. I actually quit soccer when I was 13. But the beautiful thing about this movie is that the death of the brother, as painful as it is, is the gift that gives Gracie the guts to go after something.

Q: So what kind of player were you?

A: I was fierce on the playing field. And because I was always playing sports in my family, I didn't feel like a girl. I was shy in many ways. And I was attracted to the idea that out on the playing field, you forget yourself and become just a player. Sports are still a wonderful way to prove that if you work hard at something, you can get better. I'm attracted to sports to balance the confusion of life.

Q: What was your youth like?

A: My parents divorced when I was 9. We were very middle-class. I was a great loiterer. The time in this film is obviously condensed, but when Gracie gives up and doesn't believe in herself, she starts acting out to get attention. She steals the family car. I did that many times. I was such a good driver at my age! I was driving at 15 without a license.

Q: Is this film a good story for young girls?

A: I think, for girls, this is a very important story. When you're young, there are many ways of proving your self-worth. And sports can be a very positive way of finding yourself. As a girl, it can be confusing trying to get boys to like you as a way to feel good about yourself, and trying to get your parents' attention through doing things that might alert them to the fact that you are in trouble.

Q: As a mom, would you tolerate some of the same behavior from your kids?

A: I'd have to. And I'd hope it wasn't as extreme as it was in my case. All kids have to find the moment when they differentiate themselves from their parents. I'd hate for someone to take away my rebellion.

Q: How old are your kids?

A: They are 9, 6 and eleven months. I've got a little way to go.

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