

The Ballad of Jack and Rose

Looking for a decent “relationships” movie about family and growing up and getting old, about principles and compromises, about a real life? Then check out *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, the latest effort from filmmaker Rebecca Miller.

It is 1986 when we find Jack Slavin (Daniel Day-Lewis), a one-time radical and commune leader turned fervent environmentalist living off the land in his earth-laden house on an island somewhere “off the East Coast of The United States.” He is divorced, living with his sweet, naive teen-aged daughter Rose (Camilla Belle), and fed up with a nearby developer’s attempt to build a clutch of McMansions near “his” untrammelled island. He even goes so far as to go to the building site to shoot at the construction workers with his shotgun. For female companionship he has Kathleen, a woman from the mainland (Catherine Keener), and he eventually invites her--with her two teenage sons, fleshy Rodney (Ryan McDonald) and surly Thadius (Paul Dano)--to stay with them on the island.

It is a chemistry that doesn’t blend, of course, in part because Rose has become so dependent and so possessive of her father. She is also inquisitive, however, and looks to one of Kathleen’s sons to initiate her into the mysteries of sex while she can barely stomach the other. The familial experiment inevitably fails, and ends in disaster when Rose and the boys and Thadius’s girl friend (Jena Malone) pathetically try to recreate a hippy/druggy experience in an old treehouse “acid pad.” Jack’s final, futile confrontation with the developer Marty Rance (Beau Bridges) signals the chance for a new start for Rose.

Director Rebecca Miller, the daughter of playwright Arthur Miller (and wife of Mr. Day-Lewis), had a career as an actress into the 1990’s when she began to write and direct her own material. *The Ballad of Jack and Rose* is her third film, the last being *Personal Velocity* (2002), a chamber film which offered rewarding roles to three actresses. The new film shows a leap of ambition for Miller in terms of scale, storytelling, and the handling of actors. The gorgeous landscape--shot by cinematographer Ellen Kuras off Prince Edward’s Island--is well evoked, and the scene set-ups are mostly convincing (some clang a bit, however, like the silly acid pad sequence). Her real strength comes in working with her varied cast.

And the actors are what makes *Ballad* sing. A number of character parts are well-filled, especially McDonald’s Rodney as a soft, lumbering kid who looks like a left tackle but just wants to cut girls’ hair. He plays both smart and sensitive and shows a believable rapport with young Belle. Catherine Keener is in credible form, too, as a shaky single mom who’s looking for a good man (she’s obviously had some bad ones) but finds a difficult one in the bristly Jack. Beau Bridges--so little seen on screen these days--does a neat supporting turn as the open-faced developer who is set up to be a stereotyped villain but who even truculent Jack recognizes as “decent.”

It’s a pleasure to see Daniel Day-Lewis again. This always-watchable actor has appeared in only one film (*Gangs of New York*) since 1997 ‘s *The Boxer*, but he comes back--principally because of his wife’s interest--in a complex, knotty role of a man who is beginning to see his carefully constructed world break apart. You want to be sympathetic to him for the nobility of his vision, but he pushes you away with his aggressive zeal and his off-putting behavior (e.g., puffing weed with a heart condition).

Day-Lewis also brings great physicality to his work once again (as he did so notably in *My Left Foot* and *The Boxer*) as he embodies the wracked visage and body of a dying man (he lost considerable weight for the film).

You can see how the principle of Jack's character has formed Rose, who adores him, and young Belle (now 18 and an actress since the age of six!) is a delight to watch as the coming-of-age young woman. At times, her perfect, round face--which Miller's camera studies often--makes her seem utterly naive, a vessel for the new--expressed very well when she hides in one of the immaculate, new development homes. Her extremely expressive eyes, however, also signal an intelligence well beyond her sheltered life. Can't wait to see how she does when she is *really* grown up.

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