

The Sea Inside

A superb display of acting comes to screens this month in *The Sea Inside*. It comes from the great Spanish film actor Javier Bardem (*Before Night Falls*, *The Dancer Upstairs*) in a story based on the real life ordeal of Ramon Sampedro, a Spanish quadriplegic who carried on a long legal fight for his right to die. For those with memories, good or bad, of the Brian Clark play "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" (later a 1981 film with Richard Dreyfuss)--also about a quadriplegic who wants to end it all--forget them, because this is a far superior effort: an intricate human story which is lifted out of the good to the extraordinary by the sensitive direction of Alejandro Amenabar (*Open Your Eyes*, *The Others*), a wonderfully rounded cast, and the singular performance by Mr. Bardem.

Here, as Ramon, he has been confined to bed for 28 years. Though the body is leaden, the mind is agile (he writes poetry--using a writing device in his mouth), agile enough to know that he wants his condition to end. Part of this may be because of what he has put his family through (he lives with his father, brother and sister-in-law, and their son) but mostly it his own idea of what a life should be. He hires a smart female lawyer, Julia (Belén Rueda), insisting that--to understand his case--she have a degenerative disease. He befriends a troubled young woman, Rosa (Lola Dueñas), who bonds with him because he treats her more humanely than anyone ever has. How he pursues his objective, even as his personal life gains in incident and variety, is the subject of *The Sea Inside*.

The film is thoughtfully--at times brilliantly--made. In one of the best uses of fantasy elements in any recent movie, the immobile Ramon sees, in his mind's eye, himself slowly rising from prone to perpendicular, to soar out a window to the sea he dreams of seeing again or to move to caress Julia. The family surrounding the protagonist is wonderfully complex and believable; the contrary brother who challenges the idea of his euthanasia, a saintly sister-in-law who devotes her life to him without a murmur, and a sweet nephew who accepts his uncle as he is, testy and demanding, yet funny and fair. Be advised, too, that while its subject and setting may sound monumentally depressing, the film is definitely not: it is a heartening, even invigorating story of a family coping.

Then there is Ramon himself, Javier Bardem. This is a vigorous, muscled actor who can manifest both menace and grace, a most *physical* actor, a man in charge of his body. Here, except for fantasy and flashback scenes, Mr. Bardem is a head and chest above covers, yet animated and vital. The actor, 35, plays a man roughly 15 years older, with a balding head and well-lined face (in very convincing makeup). He creates a full-bodied character with face and voice and thespian intelligence, a man with an inner life rich enough for you to wonder why he would want to end it--yet earnest enough for you to give his desire credence. This film, and this performance, will make you value life the more.

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