

## Three Peaks

Making a new family from a broken one, and the trials that can bring, is the theme of writer/director Jan Zabeil's unnerving German drama "Three Peaks." The film opens on a young boy, struggling to swim in a waterpark and aided by a kindly, handsome man. Switch to an isolated vacation spot in the soaring Italian Dolomite mountains, where we find rugged German Aaron (Alexander Fehling, the lead in "Labyrinth of Lies") who has found the woman of his dreams in his divorced French girlfriend, Lea (Bérénice Bejo, from "The Artist"). That boy is Lea's eight-year-old son Tristan (Arian Montgomery) who seems to accept Aaron but still hopes his mother will reconcile with his American father. The hope for the couple is that this sojourn together, in a primitive cabin retreat in spectacular terrain, will cement their bond as a future family.

Aaron, stoic and sincere, works hard to win over Tristan, though he is tested when the young boy insists on getting in bed with his mom while they have amorous intentions. Further, when Aaron demonstrates to Tristan how to saw up a tree, the boy ungenerously grazes his saw blade over Aaron's arm. There are other little irritations by the boy, while Lea wrestles with conflicting loyalties to her son and her dutiful lover.

In the crucial bonding exercise, Aaron takes Tristan on a mountain walk, part of it past the signature Three Peaks of the Dolomite range (symbolizing the three souls in this movie?). Yet, just when the two seem to be getting along in the rocky, snowy landscape, an eerie fog comes up, and the boy wanders off. Aaron realizes too late that he is out of sight, and the finale of the film turns into a desperate search for survival.

"Three Peaks" is both a chamber film and a slow-burn film, and both elements contribute to its impact. The chamber element is the focus on the threesome (think of a violin, a cello, and a flute combination) and their relationships, often related in whispers and asides or with no dialogue at all, all within a landscape that dwarfs them. The slow-burn is the small accretions of tiny cracks in the idyll they are trying to live, the unresolved moments that test the trio.

This gradual straining by the three to forge familial links could be seen by some as tedious and wearisome, but it feels necessary in retrospect to achieve what is a shattering climax. Besides, the film is not long, and the director has clearly used a technique of small, gradual incident to build the tension of the story. As director Zabeil has stated: "I have placed my characters in a landscape where nature plays a major part: away from the securities of the civilized world, my characters become less deliberate, more emotionally truthful and are likely to lose control over their actions."

At the very least, his film, both compressed and expansive, will give you much to chew on with respect to his watchful protagonists and their fates.

*(The film is in German, French, and English with subtitles, is unrated, and runs 94 minutes.)*

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