

What Maisie Knew

What probably was an intriguing concept for co-directors Scott McGehee and David Siegel turns vinegary in the new film “What Maisie Knew.” The screenplay borrows its theme from an 1897 novel by Henry James, changing its locale to contemporary Manhattan from Victorian London. Unfortunately, what was for the mature James a subtle, yet caustic, take on well-off dysfunctional families turns out to be overbalanced by an irritating display of irresponsible, feuding New Yorkers, redeemed only by the presence of the one true adult in the picture, young six-year-old Maisie Beale (played beautifully by Onate Aprile).

The new “What Maisie Knew” reboots the premise, this time with a well-off but clueless, self-absorbed couple, in this case aging rock singer Susanna and smug art dealer Beale (Julianne Moore and Steve Coogan), who have separated, then divorced, and have no time for their child. They keep fobbing her off to other people. Among those other people are her nanny, sweet Margo (Joanna Vanderham) and stolid bartender Lincoln (Alexander Skarsgård), vagrant mom’s new much younger squeeze.

There are custody battles, fights over school pick-up, nasty walk-outs, even casual abandonment. Why in the world, one asks, did these folks ever even agree to have a child? At one of Maisie’s final encounters with her hyped-up mom, the febrile Susanna—who hopes to take the child on tour with her—blurts out “Whaddya, scared of me?” Precisely, lady. Blessedly, there is a semi-sweet finale with an exuberant (finally) Maisie in the hands of the younger folk who at least offer her a day of fun at the beach.

Poor Maisie’s life is defined in the film from the first scene, when she is awakened from sleep by her bickering parents, a situation which is reprised several times in the film, each time more excruciating than the last. Through it all, young Aprile shows a wary yet hopeful face, rarely smiling but able to adapt to her constantly shifting fortunes. She judges, intuitively and ever so slightly, with downcast eyes and pursed mouth—but she never cries. She is the touchstone of the film, from whose viewpoint the grown-ups in the picture deserve to be spanked.

Little Aprile proves a striking, even uncanny, presence, but you have to put up with a lot to find out “What Maisie Knew.”

(Rated “R” for language and passive child abuse, the film’s running time is 93 min.)

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