

You Can Count on Me

Sometimes I recommend movies—what I think are fine movies--that have a screen life no longer than a morning glory. By the time people read the review, this kind of film, of modest means and little publicity budget, has left town... For precisely that reason, I want to mention two recent movies that I feel may have trouble finding an audience yet definitely deserve one. Pass them along as word of mouth...

You Can Count on Me has the better chance to succeed. A prize winner at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, it has been collecting ecstatic notices, to which I will add my own personal rave. That story, written by director Kenneth Lonergan, is told with such a natural ease and with such telling detail that it's as if the viewer were dropping in on the life of a very close friend, concerned for the friend but not sure how things will turn out for her.

Its story concerns how prim, responsible single mother Sammy (Laura Linney) deals with the arrival back in her small New York hometown of her rough-hewn, irresponsible younger brother Terry (Mark Ruffalo) and how this shaky relationship affects Sammy's young son Rudy (Rory Culkin). Though prim and decent, Sammy is not flawless as she falls into an affair with her uptight boss at the bank (Matthew Broderick), and Terry, while a wastrel, has some basic decency and genuinely connects with his nephew.

A terrific script and a lovely look at small town life distinguish *You Can Count on Me*, as does its uniformly fine acting. Rory Culkin, as a somewhat forlorn Rudy, happily avoids the tics of the older brothers in his acting family. Ruffalo combines an appropriately nervous, disheveled appearance with an anguished ache to do things right.

Laura Linney is a revelation. Often ill-used in recent mainstream movies (*Congo*, *Absolute Power*), this classy actress finally has a breakthrough role in this independent gem. Her Sammy is, by turns, winsome, winning, and nurturing, as well as bossy, harassed, and unsure--just like real people--and she is superb on all counts. I see her performance this year as the equivalent of Hillary Swank's last year (in *Boy's Don't Cry*) but in a much less showy role. Definitely award-worthy.

(The film is rated "R" for mature films and language.)

(December 2000)