

CODA

The Rossi family is a tight-knit fishing family living in Gloucester, Massachusetts, working rugged seas every day to make a living. Mom Jackie (Marlee Matlin), dad Frank (Troy Kutsur), and brother Leo (Daniel Durant) work alongside Ruby (Emilia Jones), the only hearing member of the group. The family is very loving and close, but Ruby alone has the opportunity to live and develop in the wider, hearing world. Good in school and a lover of music, she has joined the senior class choir and is noticed for her clear voice by her choir director, a no-nonsense educator named Mr. Villalobos (Eugenio Derbez), who pushes her, against her modest nature, to reach her full potential. He deems her talented enough for her to try out for a scholarship to the renowned Berklee College of Music in Boston, the chance of a lifetime.



The Rossi family, as featured in the heartwarming “CODA,” starring Emilia Jones (left) as Ruby. Photo courtesy of Apple TV +

Thus hangs the drama of “CODA” (Child of Deaf Parents). Can Ruby, who has known nothing outside of her family and the fishing life, go out on her own and away from a family who totally depends on her for connecting with others? This familial dependence on her, so crucial, is made evident when we see the family out on the water without her on one trip, where the local Coast Guard cannot communicate with the boat and assumes they are in danger (the audience hears the distress signals). The Guard warns the Rossis that, for their safety, they must be accompanied by a hearing person to be aware of risks and dangers. Meanwhile Ruby, encouraged by her personal progress, decides to take a scholarship to Berklee and a new life.

Filmed on location in Gloucester, the film brims with authentic fishing scenes as well as Rossi family life and spirit (the three deaf actors in the film are all actually deaf (while Emilia Jones studied nine months to attain signing competence). They are all first-rate and play off each other with wit and intelligence (the four won an award for Best Ensemble in this year's Sundance Film Festival and the movie also carried away the Grand Jury Prize). Matlin, who broke through with her first role (in "Children of a Lesser God" in 1966) is a bright and randy figure, along with Kutsur, the family comedian. Durant's character has a tart presence and harbors some resentment to his bright sister, who, even though shy and restrained, is the motor behind which the picture moves.

Besides the family foursome, the film is also aided considerably by supporting performances from Mexican actor Eugenio Derbez as the choir director Mr. V and Miles (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) as Ruby's shy, young love interest and fellow chorister. Young American writer/director Sian Heder composes their story masterfully, with a wonderful balance between the actors and a clear delineation of their differing—and contending—personalities.

The movie is graced with several telling scenes. One, for example, finds the Rossis watching a concert with the school choir, of whom Ruby forms a part. They are enjoying their daughter's participation but can hear nothing. At one point, the soundtrack goes silent, placing us in their condition of deafness, not understanding what everybody else is enjoying—moving and sad. Another has Jackie in Ruby's bedroom, where she signs how, when her daughter was born, she hoped that she would emerge deaf, like the rest of the family, but how, with the arrival of a hearing child, that desire just vanished. A scene touched with relief and remorse.

Most effecting of all is a cumulating scene when Ruby, auditioning to qualify for the program at Berklee, offers her rendition of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now." She begins softly, tentatively, but, seeing her family, who has snuck into the balcony of an almost empty theater, she gradually starts fully signing the number as her voice rises, communicating to her deaf family the only way she knows, with graceful hand and body movements, playing to them as much or more than to her three-judge panel. It fires her performance to a level where she is granted acceptance to the program. Thrilling.

We are still some distance away from awards season, but watch for this one to earn accolades at year's end.

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 111 minutes and is available in theaters and streaming).

(August 2021)