

Movie review: Gabrielle a sweet tale of first love from Quebec (with video)

Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin star in new film

BY JAY STONE, POSTMEDIA NEWS JANUARY 12, 2014

Gabrielle

Rating: 3 stars out of 5

Starring: Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin, Alexandre Landry

Directed by: Louise Archambault

Running time: 104 minutes

Parental guidance: Sexual content

(In French with English subtitles)

The Quebec film *Gabrielle* is a coming-of-age romance with a difference: The heroine is a woman with a developmental disorder that leaves her somewhere between childhood and maturity.

She's open, honest, sometimes confused about her place in life, and yearning to be free, a girl in a woman's body, and wearing her limits on the outside, where we can easily see them.

Gabrielle is played by Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, who herself has Williams syndrome, a rare neurological condition.

She is an altogether captivating screen presence with a lovely smile of genuine happiness — although from some angles she bears an uncanny resemblance to the actor Wallace Shawn — and a gift of being totally present in the moment.

Gabrielle, the character and the performer, is someone to root for.

Her story — directed by Louise Archambault, another in an apparently endless series of talented young Quebec filmmakers — is perhaps too simple to contain the complexities of her condition.

Gabrielle lives in a group home, known as “the centre,” where she sings in the choir.

She is musically gifted, although the film does not show us much of that, and like all of the residents, she is looking forward to the big concert where they will back up the Quebec star Robert Charlebois.

The Charlebois song they rehearse, *Ordinary*, is a rather obvious metaphor in a story that asks us to see the humanity behind the disability, but the movie is the kind of crowd-pleaser that floats on such notions.

Gabrielle is in love with Martin (Alexandre Landry), who is also in the choir, and their innocent exploration of first love is both sweet and troubling.

Martin's mother worries about two such people having a relationship, but *Gabrielle*'s sister Sophie (Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin) — who cares for her in place of absent parents — supports their desires.

“Everyone has the right to be loved,” she says: Gabrielle’s themes, like its narrative, are either simplistic or eloquent, depending on your taste.

When Martin and Gabrielle are forced to separate, Gabrielle becomes convinced that she should be able to live alone and make adult decisions — just as her sister does — and that somehow this will salvage her love for Martin.

It’s somewhat mad thinking, but mad thinking is what first love is all about, and part of the pleasure of Gabrielle is in seeing how such truths can be stripped down to the basics by characters (or real people) who lack the sophistication to be self-conscious about their emotions.

There’s a subplot as well, about how Sophie is caring for her sister at the expense of her relationship with a boyfriend who has gone off to teach in India.

However, this isn’t explored very deeply in Archambault’s screenplay; it’s mostly there to lend some conflict to a story that is otherwise mostly on the surface.

The incidents — Gabrielle’s sulk when she’s separated from Martin, a bus trip on her own, the time she burned the toast — are purposely small, and cinematographer Matthieu Laverdiere uses a hand-held camera and many close-ups to keep us in intimate contact with Gabrielle’s world.

By the end, everything is resolved in a way, although not much has been tied together.

Gabrielle, which was Canada’s submission for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, has the feeling of a sketch, a quick immersion in a deeper pool.

How free can a woman like Gabrielle be? Can she make a satisfying life with Martin? Gabrielle slides over these questions, and it leaves us wanting more.