

Review: Gabrielle

The healing power of music is at the core of Louise Archambault's charming love story

BY T'CHA DUNLEVY, GAZETTE FILM CRITIC SEPTEMBER 20, 2013 7:51 AM



Martin (Alexandre Landry) and Gabrielle (Gabrielle Marion-Rivard) find only joy in each other's presence.

Photograph by: Seville

Gabrielle

Four stars out of five

Starring: Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, Alexandre Landry, Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin, Sébastien Ricard, Vincent-Guillaume Otis, Benoît Gouin

Directed by: Louise Archambault

Duration: 104 minutes

Parental guidance: sexual sequence, language

Playing in French at Beaubien, Excentris, Longueuil, Marché Central, Pont Viau and St. Eustache cinemas

MONTREAL — On the surface, it's a simple love story: girl meets boy, girl likes boy, girl kisses boy. But Louise Archambault's *Gabrielle* is much more. The Quebec director's second feature is a deeply affecting tale of difference, dignity and the healing power of song.

Gabrielle, 22, is developmentally challenged, and lives in a centre for others like herself. She is played with great spirit by Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, who shares more than just a first name with her screen persona; Marion-Rivard has Williams syndrome, a rare neurodevelopmental disorder.

All is well in Gabrielle's world. She sings in a choir, and she has a special friendship with fellow singer Martin (Alexandre Landry, among a handful of professional actors in the film). It's all very innocent, until one day Martin's mother comes to visit and the two are discovered semi-clothed in Martin's bedroom.

Sexual relationships are not allowed between residents at the centre. More importantly, Martin's mom is very protective of her son; not only does she pull him out of the centre, she forbids him from seeing or talking to Gabrielle.

Archambault brings us right into Gabrielle and Martin's world, using hand-held camera, shallow depth of field and lots of close-ups — all contributing to a sense of living in the moment and seeing only what's right in front of you, with an emphasis on physical details.

There is something utterly charming about Gabrielle and Martin's relationship. Living an existence that many would look upon with pity, they find only joy in each other's presence — which makes it all the more heart-wrenching when the two are pulled apart.

Gabrielle's main support system is her sister, Sophie (played with sensitivity by Mélissa Désormeaux-Poulin), who lives an otherwise carefree adult existence. Sophie would like to go join her boyfriend, Raphaël (Sébastien Ricard), who is teaching a music program in India; but she worries about how her sibling will fare without her.

The choir is Gabrielle's sanctuary, where she and her peers are momentarily liberated from their conditions. The group is preparing for a special concert with legendary Quebec singer-songwriter Robert Charlebois, who makes a special appearance in the film.

Archambault gives ample room to the rehearsals, revealing entirely new dimensions to his songs Ordinaire and Lindberg. Something else happens, as well; the music allows us to better feel the chorists's humanity, providing a level of empathy that would not have been possible otherwise.

On a normal day, most of us don't have much opportunity for interaction with people in Gabrielle's condition. Archambault's movie takes us inside, makes us root for her protagonist and provides a disarmingly cathartic payoff.

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