

Locarno Film Review: 'Gabrielle'



AUGUST 20, 2013 | 06:54PM PT

Louise Archambault's heart-tugger fits into the solid market for well-made, uplifting stories about individuals with special needs.

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Two developmentally disabled members of a Montreal choir want to exert independence and consummate their love in Louise Archambault (<http://variety.com/t/louise-archambault/>)'s predictably sweet "Gabrielle (<http://variety.com/t/gabrielle/>)." Fitting into the solid market for well-made, uplifting stories about individuals with special needs fighting the odds and coming into their own, the pic can also be seen as a manipulative heart-tugger directed at self-satisfied audiences who enjoy rooting for those less fortunate than themselves. "Gabrielle" makes nice use of the expressive qualities of group singing, and Archambault generally avoids the Afterschool Special feel associated with such themes. Locarno's public prize and healthy international sales presage popular embrace.

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No doubt producer Luc Dery is hoping for a trajectory of success similar to that of his “Monsieur Lazhar,” another Locarno entry that went on to be shortlisted for the 2011 foreign Oscar. Both French-Canadian productions are high on mass appeal and feel-good emotion, aiming for a mainstream constituency that wants reasonably intelligent pics without too much arthouse pretension. Whether “Gabrielle” can scale the same heights will depend on marketing and critical support.

Les Muses de Montreal is a choir composed of developmentally disabled singers, directed by Remi (Vincent-Guillaume Otis). One of the most enthusiastic members is Gabrielle (Gabrielle Marion-Rivard), a 22-year-old with a beaming smile and a delight in dancing. She has Williams syndrome, a genetic disorder marked by cognitive underdevelopment as well as gregariousness and advanced musical skills. Gabrielle and fellow singer Martin (Alexandre Landry) have fallen in love, but his mother, Claire (Marie Gignac), wants to keep them apart, feeling that special-needs people aren’t equipped to handle relationships.

Gabrielle’s sister Sophie (Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin) is far more supportive, but she’s planning to be join her b.f., Raphael (Sebastien Ricard), in India to help underprivileged children — yes, there’s a lot of do-gooding in “Gabrielle.” Sophie keeps delaying her departure for fear Gabrielle will take it poorly, especially at a time when she’s being forcibly separated from Martin.

Claire yanks Martin from the choir just when they’re about to make their big splash singing at a summer music festival with star Canadian crooner Robert Charlebois (making a cameo appearance). The separation sends Gabrielle into a tailspin as she fights for independence like “normal” people, only to come up against her limitations.

Archambault’s handling of Gabrielle and Martin’s sexuality is one of the pic’s strong suits, presenting their desire with a refreshing, straightforward honesty. Characterization is weak when it comes to Claire, seen too much as the devil of the piece, and Gabrielle’s largely absent mother (Isabelle Vincent) cries out for further development (perhaps it’s on the cutting-room floor). The sophomore helmer-scripter (who made her debut with “Familia”) goes overboard trying to be all-inclusive, even making the impossibly perfect community home supervisor

(Benoit Gouin) gay; with a subject that already wears its politically correct credentials with pride, this is really gilding the lily.

The glowing Marion-Rivard, in her first role, appears to seamlessly navigate her thespian requirements, ably supported by professional actors Landry and Desormeaux-Poulin. Musical scenes are a highlight (barring one slo-mo sequence that looks like a generic musicvideo), and Archambault knows how to harness the emotional dividends from the group dynamics of choral singing. Three times, during moments of heightened drama, the screen goes mute; some will find the device effective, while others will think it's a feint. Consummate lensing by Mathieu Laverdiere uses handheld cameras for an informal yet controlled style, with nice use of natural light.

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Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (Piazza Grande), Aug. 11, 2013. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentations.) Running time: 103 MIN.

Production

(Canada) A Les Films Christal release of a micro_scope production, with the participation of Super Ecran, ARTV. (International sales: eOne Films Intl., Montreal.) Produced by Luc Dery, Kim McCraw.

Crew

Directed, written by Louise Archambault. Camera (color), Mathieu Laverdiere; editor, Richard Comeau; music, Francois Lafontaine; production designer, Emmanuel Frechette; costume designer, Sophie Lefebvre; sound, Pierre Bertrand, Bernard Gariepy Strobl; sound designer, Sylvain Bellemare; assistant director, Eric Parenteau; casting, Lucie Robitaille.

With

Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, Melissa Desormeaux-Poulin, Alexandre Landry, Vincent-Guillaume Otis, Benoit Gouin, Sebastien Ricard, Isabelle Vincent, Marie Gignac, Veronique Beaudet, Robert Charlebois, Gregory Charles. (French dialogue)