

Excalibur staff be advised:

meetings will be held every Thursday at 11 am. Be sure to attend this week's meeting for sub-editorial elections. All *Excal* staff are eligible to vote. Assignments can be picked up at this time. Deadlines for submitting articles is at high noon on Mondays—no exceptions. *Excalibur* is always looking for aspiring writers, so tell your friends to come down to Room 111, Central Square.

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Mermaids singing sweetly in filmmaker's strong debut

By WYNDHAM PAUL WISE

Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing* opened the 12th annual Festival of Festivals with about as much hype and bluster as a low-budget film with a no-name star could muster. As Canada's official entry at Cannes this year, it received a standing ovation and the festival's Prix de la jeunesse. Its star, Shelia McCarthy, became, overnight, the focus of international press coverage.

More importantly, *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing* secured a profitable US distribution deal. Now it returns home to more media adulation. Not since Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* has there been this much attention paid to an English-language Canadian film.

Fortunately, amongst all the hoopla, there is a tiny gem of a movie. *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing* is a gentle comedy about Polly Vandersma (McCarthy), an "organizationally impaired person Friday," who works for a chic downtown art dealer.

Her story is told in the form of a self-confession, taped on video. As Polly talks and mimics in front of the camera, her relationship with the dealer is revealed in flashback.

Polly lives alone in a world of dreams and visions. Sweet, self-conscious, and bumbling, she can never seem to hold down a job. Her passion is photography and her work covers the walls of her small Toronto apartment. She dreams of flying, walking on water and talking eruditely about life and art. She manages to secure a job in an avant garde art gallery run by an attractive older woman (Paule Baillargeon), who is deluded by ideas of a different sort. She desperately wants to be known as a great artist. A strange dependency develops between the two women that is shattered by the arrival of the dealer's lesbian lover.

Polly resents this intrusion and withdraws in anger. When the dealer rejects her photographs as "trite made flesh," she exacts a terrible revenge. The film ends with a less than satisfying reconciliation scene, as the three walk together into an "enchanted" forest.

At times whimsical to a fault, *I've Heard The Mermaids Singing* is nevertheless a charming film, almost



Sheila McCarthy in *Mermaids*

wholly dependent on McCarthy's extraordinary performance as Polly. Her sweet innocence is completely credible and never mawkish. Where a lesser actress might lapse into mugging, McCarthy uses subtle gestures, almost like a pantomime artist. She transforms her character from gangly goofiness to Madonna-like grace with ease.

Unfortunately, Baillargeon and her lover, Ann-Marie McDonald, are at a loss with their roles and the scenes between them are awkward and stiff. Only when Polly is on her own, bicycling around the city taking pictures, in her apartment, darkroom, or dreaming, does the film transcend its uneven script. These moments are magical, and a triumph for first-time director Patricia Rozema.

Rozema's style is rigorous and draws from video and the visual arts. Rozema has a good eye for framing her shots and there are some stunning close-ups of McCarthy in her darkroom. The film is possibly the strongest directorial debut by an English-language filmmaker since the all-but-forgotten *Big Meat Eater*, by Chris Windsor, in 1981.

With any luck Rozema will be able to avoid the usual pitfalls of Canadian overnight success stories and continue to work in Canada. Shelia McCarthy has returned to the stage and is currently starring in *Cabaret* at the Stratford Festival.

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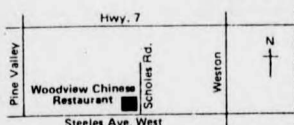
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