

Ondine'

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You know it's an Irish fairytale when the mists swirl and the sea churns around the harsh beauty of the Emerald Isle. You know it's a Neil Jordan Irish fairytale when at the center of all that harsh beauty is a working-class family broken apart by alcoholism.

That is "Ondine," starring Colin Farrell as Syracuse, a local fisherman with a grudge-holding, heavy-drinking ex-wife and a spirited daughter on dialysis. Syracuse is long past having dreams when he snares a beautiful woman in his nets, and reality and Irish mythology soon tangle in ways both magical and frustrating. It can sometimes feel as if the director is the one lost at sea.

Nevertheless, there is much to recommend "Ondine," Jordan's love letter to Castletownbere, the fishing village on Ireland's southern coast where he lives and where the film was shot; and the notion that no matter how bruised and battered by life, love is still possible, still the answer.

It's a small film, and there's a spare, dreamlike quality that's a departure for a writer-director who tends toward densely detailed stories stuffed with moral complications, "The Crying Game," "Mona Lisa" and "Michael Collins" among them. Sometimes, the simplicity of the story confounds him, with young Annie (Alison Barry) saddled with a wheelchair, a failing kidney and most of the exposition of the story - too much to ask of a child.

The mysterious woman at the heart of this tale is Ondine, Alicja Bachleda of "Trade," who's perfectly cast as an ethereal creature that may be a selkie - in the way of mermaids, they are seals able to transform into seductively gorgeous humans when the circumstances are right. There are, as might be expected, all sorts of strings attached involving seven tears, sealskins and long-term commitments.

All Syracuse knows is that Ondine is running from something, that her haunting songs increase his daily catch and that she seems to be falling in love with him. Annie is more interested in a selkie's wish-granting powers, while Syracuse's ex, Maura (Dervla Kirwan), is more concerned with where she's sleeping.

Jordan uses the push and pull between real life and legend to explore ideas of social ills, retribution, justice, family bonds and miracles in an age in which it seems there are none. For the filmmaker, optimism and a happy ending are not things he gives away easily, if ever, and there are any number of difficulties he's thrown in along the way, with Ondine's shadowy past rising up right alongside Syracuse's to rough things up.

The filmmaker creates a world so real that you can feel the chill of the water, smell the sweat in the bar. There is so much beauty too, with Jordan clearly ecstatic to be kicking around his hometown, where he uses its weathered nooks and crannies as a gritty contrast to the wild coast and bucolic fields of wildflowers and green as he moves between reality and myth. Director of photography Christopher Doyle follows closely along, capturing both in ways that keep the film's heart beating and that will no doubt boost the region's tourism as well.

At times, the narrative flows beautifully, particularly in the growing connection between Syracuse and Ondine, the slow reveal of who they really are, the delicious tension in their tentativeness. Farrell exposes much with those dark eyes and wary hesitations. It's hard not to wish more filmmakers would tap into that quieter, more vulnerable side.

At other times, the road is rocky when the story speeds up to take care of business, with the end a mad dash to tie up loose ends. Still, there is enough saving grace on these craggy shores to let the mists and the legends roll in and envelop you for a while.

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ONDINE

MPAA rating: PG-13 for some violence, sensuality and brief strong language

Running time: 1 hour, 43 minutes

Playing: In limited release