

Islander

By Kirk Honeycutt

Bottom line: An effective and graceful portrait in courage in the face of overwhelming ostracism.

"Islander" harkens back to a time, say 15 to 20 years ago, when independent filmmaking often meant regional filmmaking, where filmmakers explored their communities and told stories that gave us authentically rendered glimpses into American lives outside major urban areas. In this story about a prodigal son, the film gains much of its strength from a vivid depiction of a small island off the coast of Maine. These filmmakers -- director Ian McCrudden who co-wrote the script with his producer-star Thomas Hildreth -- know and understand the mind set, lingo, traditions and attitudes of these islanders, thus rooting their drama in a ruggedly individualistic people with long memories and often short tempers.

The film's artistic ambitions go beyond its faithful evocation of this fishing community. In relating a story based loosely on a real-life incident, McCrudden and Hildreth are willing to portray their protagonist in a completely unsympathetic light initially, then labor to redeem the character as they bear witness to the changes and growing maturity in a humbled roughneck.

"Islander" makes a great festival film, but such an intelligent and compelling drama deserves wider theatrical exposure. With a committed distributor, the film could penetrate art houses and possibly even a few rural cinemas where locals may recognize themselves in these characters who struggle to sustain a vanishing way of life.

In Vinalhaven, Maine, fishing rights are passed down from father to son. Despite dwindling catches, Eben Cole (Hildreth) has already established himself in his 20's with his own boat and traps and a comfortable house for his feisty wife Cheryl (Amy Jo Johnson) and small daughter Sara. When "mainlanders" brazenly encroach on his fishing territory, the hot-head decides to settle the score himself. Ignoring warnings from his dad (Larry Pine) and rival Jimmy (Mark Kiely), Eben goes the lone ranger route with disastrous consequences. The five-year manslaughter conviction he receives tears up his home and sets the community against him.

When he returns to the island, his estranged father has died, his ex-wife has moved in with Jimmy and no one will hire him even as a sternman. But prison has taught Eben patience. And, in reality, he has no other choice but to remain on the island: He knows no other life.

He slowly wins back the confidence of his adolescent child (Emma Ford). A crusty old salt, Popper (veteran actor Philip Baker Hall), offers him part-time work on his boat. Then Emily (Judy Prescott), a woman doctor who is not an islander, overlooks his past to see the good man Eben has become.

This simple, classic story is enlivened with well described characters and credible emotions that make us empathize with the motives and decision of all characters. Those choices often spring from generations of traditions among the islanders and ideas about how a man should think and act.

Hildreth, a Maine native -- a grandfather served as governor -- infuses Eben with much neediness. Eben craves support and affection. His father fails him in this department and then his wife feels that abandonment is her only option for survival. Gradually though, he wins over Poppy and then Emily and her son (Zach Batchelder). How things will go with Sara are left up in the air -- refreshingly so as most current filmmakers seem compelled to tie up every plot thread ever so neatly. But we suspect things will work out despite his ex-wife's decision to leave the island.

Dan Coplan's cinematography and Daniel Boxer's production design beautifully capture island life by isolating telling details at sea and on dry land that bring us into these people's lives.

ISLANDER

Down East Films

Credits:

Director: Ian McCrudden

Writers: Ian McCrudden, Thomas Hildreth

Producers: Thomas Hildreth, Forrest Murray

Director of photography: Dan Coplan

Production designer: Daniel Boxer

Music: Billy Mallery

Co-producer: Melissa Davis

Costumes: Josie Basford

Editor: Marc Jozefowicz.

Cast:

Eben: Thomas Hildreth

Cheryl: Amy Jo Johnson

Popper: Philip Baker Hall

T. Hardy: Ron Canada

Old man Cole: Larry Pine

Jimmy: Mark Kiely

Pokey: James Parks

Emily: Judy Prescott

Sara: Emma Ford

Wyatt: Zach Batchelder.

No MPAA rating

Running time -- 105 minutes