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Movie Review

"Islander" | Trapped in a small Maine town

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"Truthiness," as Stephen Colbert might say, is what the creative team behind this spare and authentically atmospheric drama were striving for in their observation of cynical Maine lobstermen and a tragedy that affects nearly everyone within their tiny island world. The resulting captured reality is vividly successful for its *vérité* quality and documentarylike texture that avoids artifice and goes a long way to fill some voids in story and structure.

The gloomy skies, postcard views of Maine coastlines, ancient lobster pots stacked high against ramshackle clapboard houses, the distrust of outsiders, the dockside town watering hole and the thick Down East accents spoken by crusty old salts whose livelihood depends on the fickle breeding habits of the big-clawed "bugs" that crawl into their traps are all infused with a veracity that couldn't be faked.

On one of his routine outings, struggling fishing-boat captain Eben Cole (co-writer Tom Hildreth) discovers unfamiliar floats attached to traps set by "mainlanders." This is an infuriating breach of an unwritten code that prohibits fishing in waters that are considered the sole property of islanders. His outrage is fueled by increasingly lean seasons for the weary island fishermen (fish, bugs and lobsters are synonymous for natives).

In his fury, Eben causes the death of a boy on the mainlanders' boat and is sent to prison for five years. When he returns to the island, Eben has lost his wife and

young daughter to a rival fisherman. Also without a boat or a captain's license, he's become pariah and outcast to an economically depressed community that never forgets but eventually may have the ability to forgive.

Many in the cast are nonactor locals, supported by a few pros who nail the cadence of dialect and languid complexity inherent to the region's unusual lifestyle. The speech could easily have fallen into drawls of "ayuh" Maine parody, but the genuine intricacies of daily life as examined without pretense keep distortion at bay. An understated performance by Philip Baker Hall as a semi-retired old-guard fisherman who helps Eben with redemption gives a boost to the sense of gravitas.

This slip of a fable is an earnest effort clearly spun from a shoestring budget. Though spotty and sometimes frayed in its overall grasp of construction and technique, "Islander" is nonetheless a noble entry into the real world of timeless and truly independent American cinema.

97 minutes. Rated R for language and brief sexuality.