



Islander

By [JUSTIN CHANG](#)



Amy Jo Johnson and Thomas Hildreth face rough emotional waters in Ian McCrudden's Maine-set indie pic 'Islander.'

A Down East Films presentation. Produced by Thomas Hildreth, Forrest Murray. Co-producer, Melissa Davis.

Directed by Ian McCrudden. Screenplay, McCrudden, Thomas Hildreth.

Eben Cole - Thomas Hildreth

Cheryl Cole - Amy Jo Johns

Jimmy - Mark Kiely

Old Man Cole - Larry Pine

Pokey - James Parks

T. Hardy - Ron Canada

Emily - Judy Prescott

Popper - Philip Baker Hall

A correction was made to this review on July 25, 2006.

A powerfully atmospheric sense of place engulfs "Islander," helmer Ian McCrudden's intimate drama about the sacrifices made and life lessons learned by the residents of an offshore fishing community. Thomas Hildreth's deeply felt performance as a prodigal ex-con anchors this slow-moving vessel, which glides gently on a sea of understated emotions and character insights, jolted only by occasional narrative gusts. Poignant item should garner additional fest slots and distrib interest, with exceedingly warm audience reactions along the way.

Lensed in and around Vinalhaven, a small island off the coast of Maine, pic immediately grounds itself in a town of invariably gray weather, thick regional accents, and plain-spoken citizens leading hardscrabble lives.

Lobster fisherman Eben Cole (Maine native Hildreth) is devoted to his wife Cheryl (Amy Jo Johnson) and daughter Sara (Mackenzie Young), yet also stubbornly territorial, which gets him into trouble one morning when his efforts to drive away two mainlanders fishing nearby leads indirectly to tragedy. Lengthy, slightly awkward setup ends with Eben being sent to prison, leaving Cheryl and Sara to fend for themselves, while his father (Larry Pine), ashamed, turns his back on him.

Five years later, Eben is released and returns to the island, only to find that his dad has died; Cheryl has left him to shack up with his jerk rival Jimmy (Mark Kiely); and he's forbidden from seeing Sara (now played by Emma Ford). Even his former sternman Pokey (James Parks) now works for Jimmy, and because Eben is shunned by all fishermen as a bad-luck charm, he's forced to take a job at the local junkyard.

While its New England milieu and melodramatic circumstances may at first recall "In the Bedroom," "Islander" tells a very different and, in the end, more plausible story, one less interested in Eben's crime than his attempts to rebuild his life.

Without spelling itself out too emphatically, pic movingly acknowledges the redeeming bonds of friendship within an enclosed community, as well as the importance of making peace with one's decisions and moving on. Central to this

theme is the island itself, which is a home for some characters and a prison for others, and quickly assumes the importance of a character in its own right. The generally somber mood, balanced by a wry, salty sense of humor that feels utterly intrinsic to the setting, falters only when heated confrontations and narrative incident are called for. Far more satisfying are the rich, absorbing, beautifully played dialogues between Eben and Popper (an excellent Philip Baker Hall), an elderly fisherman who gives Eben a chance, and Emily (Judy Prescott), a kindly doctor whose son Wyatt (Zach Batchelder) is an aspiring trawler himself. Hildreth (who produced with Forrest Murray) penned the sensitive script with McCrudden, and their collaboration as actor and director is even stronger. Initially an intimidating and volatile figure, his vulnerability concealed behind a rugged beard that is pointedly absent upon his return, Hildreth's Eben emerges as a figure of innate decency, quiet resolve and deep emotional reserves. Sole weak link in the cast is Johnson, who has some noticeably flat moments early on and looks rather less weathered than the other actors, but eventually grows into her role as the weak-willed Cheryl. Billy Mallery's lovely guitar-driven score enhances the impeccable sense of place, while Dan Coplan's high-def Panasonic Varicam lensing gives the Maine locales a crisp, realistic and fittingly forlorn look. Boating sequences are staged and shot with complete confidence. Camera (color, HD), Dan Coplan; editor, Marc Jozefowicz; music, Billy Mallery; production designer, Daniel Boxer; costume designers, Josie Basford, Nicole Palczynski; art director, Mark Gruskin; sound, P. Daniel Newman; stunt coordinator, Brian Smyj; casting, Caroline Sinclair, Karen True. Reviewed at Los Angeles Film Festival (competing), June 25, 2006. Running time: 103 MIN.