



"ISLANDER"

Movie Rating: (R) | Grade: A-

Regional filmmaking is not only alive and well. It's markedly superior to current Hollywood fare in "Islander," a drama about the close-quartered lives of Maine lobstermen.

Hotheaded Eben Cole (Tom Hildreth), who lives and works on a small, closely knit island off the coast of Maine, has been cutting another fisherman's lines to protest the man's encroachment upon his territory.

At home, Eben has a smoldering relationship with his sexy, young wife, Cheryl (Cape Cod native Amy Jo Johnson, "Wildfire," "Felicity") and a nurturing bond with their daughter, Sara (Mackenzie Young). Among his peers, Eben is respected, warily. But Eben loses it during an encounter with his rival, Jimmy (Mark Kiely). Firing a shotgun into the water, Eben causes the accidental death of an innocent man.

Five years later, ex-convict Eben returns to find his beloved father (Larry Pine) has died and his wife, her options as limited as the island's square footage, has moved in with Jimmy.

Beautifully cast and well-scripted by director Ian McCrudden and Maine native Hildreth, "Islander" is a pleasant surprise in a terrible season for mainstream movies. The film tells an enormously engrossing story and features a cast mixing such seasoned actors as Philip Baker Hall and Pine with less familiar faces, all doing fine work.

Television veteran Johnson, in particular, shines as the island's sexual prize and puts most of her more famous and better-paid screen peers to shame. Hollywood, take notice.

But what really sets "Islander" apart is marine photography by Steadicam whiz Dan Coplan. Shot on location in Vinalhaven and environs, the film is a New England seacoast visual feast. It is so breathtaking, you may find yourself booking passage Down East. McCrudden, whose credits include the direct-to-DVD 2006 horror film "Trespassers," is unknown to me. I look forward to whatever he does next.

("Islander" contains sexual situations, violence and profanity. Hildreth and McCrudden will be present to answer questions at the evening screenings at the Kendall this weekend.)