

THE PHANTOM TOLLBOOTH

Pearl Diver*

Stars: Kim Stauffer, Amy Jean Johnson, Joey Honsa, Brian Boland, Maddie Abshire, Yevgani Lazarev and Christopher Collard

Director/Scriptwriter: Sidney King

Music: Jay Lapp and Frances Miller

Cinematographer: John Rotan

Running Time: 90 minutes

Rating: not rated but could be PG 13

*Reviewed at the Kansas International Film Festival September 2005

Pearl Diver is an independent film that is being shown at film fests around the country, which will lead to a full-fledged run soon. The story concerns a 20-year old murder and how it is still affecting the lives of two sisters (Kim Stauffer and Amy Jean Johnson). Their mother was the murder victim. The family is of the Mennonite community and director Sidney King takes full advantage of the farm vistas around Elkhart, Indiana to give the audience a feel of the country and violence hidden there.

The film begins with Kim, a writer who has left the Mennonite community to pursue a successful career. She lives in the city and comes back when one of their mother's killers is up for parole. Amy is the older sister who stayed in the community, married and has a daughter, Hannah (Maddie Abshire). Hannah has a terrible farm accident that may leave her disfigured. Kim agrees to stay and help and finds a rental house. While in the town she renews acquaintances with Isaac (Yevgani Lazarev) of the neighboring farm and his son, Adam (Christopher Collard), a professional musician. There are many secrets in this community and they unfold before us.

Several stories are going on at the same time: Kim still dealing with her mother's violent death through flashbacks. Adam and his friendship with Kim, Hannah's accident and mounting medical costs, and the strain between Amy and her husband. Kim wants to write about their mother's death as her way of dealing with it, but Amy believes this is an invasion of their privacy. The money would help Hannah, but does Amy want money that way? What hangs over everyone is one sentence at the beginning of the film, and that is, there were two men at the house that night, but only one is discussed at parole time. What happened to the other man? With this in mind, even after twenty years, every time Kim is alone or a door swings open, the audience slowly begins to wonder what will happen next? What does happen is surprising.

Pearl Diver is a well-told, well-photographed, well-acted film. There is sparse dialogue that goes with the sparse life in this community. Houses are spotlessly clean and people readily share to help their friends in need. It is, indeed, a community. The landscape, with fields and sunsets, becomes part of the story, as director King uses it almost like having a curtain drop in a play to announce the end of one act and the beginning of another.

The kitchen is sometimes the first room one enters in a house and is a place of welcome and safety. Matters of the heart and hearth are discussed in a kitchen and Amy's kitchen happens to be the one in which Amy and Kim grew up. In the lives of these two sisters, however, it became a place of violence. Writer/director Sidney King gives his audience quite a tale.

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