

'Pearl Diver'

3 stars out of 4

Drama

Panorama Entertainment

Chapel Hill resident Sidney King's debut film "Pearl Diver" was custom built for the festival circuit.

With the unpolished grit of an independent production, "Pearl" examines the emotional hardships of genuine Middle Americans. It favors long, sweeping passages of artistic contemplation, relies heavily on flashbacks to hide a central mystery, and builds to a climax that teaches us something about humanity.

Hannah (Joey Honsa) is an author who escaped her Indiana hometown for the big-city lights of Chicago. She also left her sister, Marian (Amy Jean Johnson), behind to tend to the family's property in the heart of the Mennonite farming community. But when an accident involving Marian's daughter Rebecca (Maddie Abshire) occurs in the fields, Hannah returns home to stare down harsh memories regarding the murder of the sisters' mother.

King anchors "Pearl" with Honsa and Johnson's tough performances as siblings with a hard truth separating them. Honsa is a wholesome beauty, so we go along with her character's shaky relationship with a hippie farmhand (Christopher Collard). The theme of running away from one's problems is carried to fruition by the able cast – only Brian Boland, playing Johnson's salt-of-the-earth husband, seems out of his league.

It's a compliment to say that "Pearl" would find a sympathetic audience at the Sundance Film Festival, where grassroots explorations of family controversy blossom like wildflowers. Instead, after stopping at supportive (and smaller) fests like the one in nearby Asheville, "Pearl" is getting a two-week run at the Manor Theatre where it should appeal to art-house patrons eager to chew on slow-moving but rewarding character pieces.

Rating: 3 out of 4

MPAA Rating: Not rated

Starring: Joey Honsa, Amy Jean Johnson

**Movies reviewed and rated by Sean O'Connell,
Arts & Entertainment Editor.**