

SBIFF gets underway in California, with plenty of films on offer



By Eric Althoff - Thursday, February 4, 2016

The festival is underway in paradise.

The 31st annual Santa Barbara International Film Festival kicks off this weekend in the glorious American Riviera, with awards, special guests, celebrity tributes to the likes of Sylvester Stallone and Johnny Depp and, of course, films galore.

While it's impossible to see absolutely everything on offer (trust me, I've tried), here are some films to keep an eye out for that I've had a chance to take a look at. I'll be updating the coverage as the fest goes on.

Director Rebecca Daly ventures where few dare to tread in the Oedipal nightmare "**Mammal**," featuring an outstanding Rachel Griffiths ("Six Feet Under," "Hillary and Jackie") as Margaret, a divorced Dubliner who is rocked by the news that her long-missing teenage son has been found dead. In her subdued grief, Margaret develops an odd friendship of sorts with a homeless young gang member named Joe (Barry Keoghan). While at first her offer to allow Joe to use her son's abandoned room seems borne from a need to turn tragedy into goodness, Margaret gradually veers into twisted "Vertigo" territory, dressing Joe in her son's clothes as prelude to a twisted sexual draw and a means to assuage the torment of loss.

Ms. Daly and her co-writer, Glenn Montgomery, treat the subject as matter-of-fact, never condescending to their characters or treating the tender emotional landmines as fodder for laughter or obvious tragedy. Nor is Margaret's ex-husband and her son's father, Matt (Michael McElhatton) a figure of derision, even if he could in theory be called the "antagonist" when he gets wind of Margaret's actions.

Melodrama like this hasn't come along in quite some time. A better performance than Miss Griffiths' might not be seen this year.

Screens Thursday at 11:20 a.m. at Metro 2 and Friday at 2:20 p.m., also at Metro 2.