

## ‘Mammal’: Sundance Review

1/28/2016 by Justin Lowe



**Irish writer-director Rebecca Daly’s film, starring Rachel Griffiths, is a gritty feature focusing on loss and redemption.**

The landscape of grief encompasses both universal and very personal territory, realms that Dublin-set drama *Mammal* explores with curiosity and compassion, although not always with narrative precision. AMC Networks' Sundance Channel Global secured broadcast rights for multiple territories at the festival and theatrical distributors may take an interest as well, despite the film’s minimalist style and subdued performances.

Daly’s second feature centers on divorced, middle-aged Margaret (Rachel Griffiths), who lives a solitary life and seems to like it that way. She owns a second-hand store in a nondescript corner of the city, but barely has a word to say to her shop assistant and rarely socializes. Practically her only diversion is a daily dip at the local indoor public pool, where she prefers to swim underwater so she won’t be distracted by others. Her careful routine is unexpectedly disrupted by the reappearance of her ex-husband Matt (Michael McElhatton), who’s come to tell her that their 18-year-old son Patrick has gone missing. Margaret takes the news without much apparent emotion, since she’s never seen Patrick again since leaving the boy with Matt years before.

At about the same time she befriends Joe (Barry Keoghan), a homeless young man about the same age as her missing son, whom she assists after finding him injured and unconscious in the alley behind her shop one night. When she encounters him again at the pool, she offers to let Joe stay rent-free in her extra bedroom while she seeks a new lodger. A bit like the feral cats that Margaret adopts from the streets, he’s wary and standoffish at first, but decides to move in with his few possessions after checking out her small two-bedroom home.

Soon Matt is back again, this time with devastating news: Patrick’s body has been found after he fell into a canal and drowned. To avoid any “trouble,” Matt forbids Margaret from attending the funeral and instead she throws her energy into getting Joe settled at her place. As they spend more time together, sharing jokes, beers and smokes, their relationship begins to take on new dimensions that neither has anticipated, forcing them both to consider what they’re seeking from their makeshift arrangement.

Again working with co-writer Glenn Montgomery as she did on her debut feature, mystery drama *The Other Side of Sleep*, Daly has crafted a carefully calibrated portrait of emotional loss in its various manifestations. While Matt can't manage to move on from his son's death, Margaret attempts to manifest a parental relationship with Joe as a substitute for the son she never knew and attain some measure of redemption in the process. For his part, Joe keeps trying to reconcile his painful decision to leave home with his inability to survive on the streets, even as his frequent late-night forays with the loose-knit gang that he used to run with threaten to destabilize his situation at Margaret's.

Australian actor Rachel Griffiths plays the lead role with a degree of emotional reticence that cloaks the character in near-inscrutability. Even when Margaret appears frightened or elated, Griffiths operates in a limited range that's perhaps attributable to the sense of loss that Margaret feels about Patrick, or perhaps some further undisclosed trauma. Keoghan, who's been appearing consistently in smaller feature roles and Irish TV series, here gives an intense performance as a tortured young man on the verge of utterly destroying his life before it's even quite begun, never really settling on a predictable path to stability.

McElhatton is a veteran actor who gingerly handles Matt's overwhelming grief and barely controlled rage over his son's death, unpredictably balancing between his character's limited ability to cope and his inclination to lash out at anyone and everyone around him. Daly's preference for fixed shots, deliberate framing, long silences and spare scoring doesn't much improve the approachability of the narrative, which for the viewer is often more about observation than participation.

*Production companies: Fastnet Films, Calach Films, Les Films Fauves, Rinkel Film*

*Cast: Rachel Griffiths, Barry Keoghan, Michael McElhatton, Johnny Ward, Rachel O'Byrne, Nika McGuigan, Aoife King, Kathy Monaghan*

*Director: Rebecca Daly*

*Screenwriters: Rebecca Daly, Glenn Montgomery*

*Producers: Conor Barry, Macdara Kelleher*

*Executive producers: John Kelleher, Rory Gilmartin*

*Director of photography: Lennart Verstegen*

*Production designer: Audrey Hernu*

*Costume designer: Uli Simon*

*Editor: Halina Daugird*

*Music: Rutger Reinders*

*Casting director: Amy Rowan*

*Venue: Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema Dramatic Competition)*

*Sales: Picture tree international*