

KELLI SCHROEDER, PARAMOUNT CLASSICS, 2004



Marty (Scott Mechlowicz) and Sam (Rory Culkin) in a good moment in the boat.

## Dark Journey

Boys and a girl in a boat

**MEAN CREEK:** Written and directed by Jacob Aaron Estes. Produced by Rick Rosenthal, Susan Johnson, Hagai Shanam. Executive producers, Nancy Stephens, Gigi Pritzker, Deborah Del Prete. Cinematography, Sharone Meir. Editor, Madeleine Gavin. Production design, Greg McMickle. Costumes, Cynthia Morrill. Music supervisor, Robin Urdang. Starring Rory Culkin, Ryan Kelley, Scott Mechlowicz, Trevor Morgan, Josh Peck and Carly Schroeder. Paramount Classics, 2004. R. 87 minutes. 2004 Sundance Humanitas Award.

**F**ilmed on location in Estcada and Troutdale, Ore., and Lewis River, Wash., *Mean Creek* directs a contemporary attitude at themes present nearly 20 years ago in a pair of seminal films: *Stand By Me* (1986) and *River's Edge* (1987). In

*Stand By Me*, four 12-year-old boys, hassled by older boys, hike into the Oregon woods where they discover a body. They learn about life and the proximity of death in this picture set near Cottage Grove. In *River's Edge*, a group of teens are confronted by a homicide in their midst and have to discover where their loyalties lie.

Familiarity with the land, woods and rivers of the Pacific Northwest gives *Mean Creek* an immediate authenticity. While the film feels original and current, the ways older brothers and their friends treat younger guys doesn't change much from generation to generation it seems. These teens live in a small town, where

everybody knows everyone else's business, which also builds adolescent tension.

Sam (Rory Culkin) takes an undeserved beating from the school bully, George (Josh Peck), for looking into the boy's ever-present video camera. George is mean-spirited, friendless and much larger than Sam. Sam is a shy, small kid, with a good disposition. His older brother, Rocky (Trevor Morgan), tells his friends about George

attacking Sam, and the alpha male of the group, Marty (Scott Mechlowicz), is ready for the challenge George represents. Clyde (Ryan Kelley), who hates it when Marty calls him "gay" because his father is, also wants to revenge the beatings he took from George. Just as a joke, they tell each other, they'll take George's clothes off and throw him in the river.

Sam and his sweet girlfriend Millie (Carly Schroeder) plan to spend a day together in the woods. These two are the youngest and most vulnerable of the group to head off for a river trip to celebrate Sam's made-up birthday party with Rocky, Marty, Clyde and George, who is clearly a nicer kid when he feels like he has some friends. But George is not all right, and each member of the party has to deal with his own feelings to keep the day peaceful.

Even as the plan unfolded, a sick feeling settled over me. The dynamics were weighted toward misfortune, and no matter that Millie and Sam persuaded the older boys to call off the prank, some kind of irrevocable fate was in charge that day on the river. The peaceful, pleasant moments came and went. Meanwhile, inner tensions and open conflicts within the party worked on them all. As any adult group would, these young people created their own dynamic, which lead them on a dark journey.

It's a funny thing about national critics from big cities. I often have the sense they were never children or teenagers, that they have never been camping or taken river trips. I'm fairly sure that those of us living in a place where the woods and waters are places we know about from a young age make this film more memorable than for others who view everything outside the city as "wilderness."

The young actors are spontaneous and respectful, even when the character they play has to go into emotionally difficult places. Schroeder shows us through expression and body language how Millie has internalized the day's events. She doesn't look like the same girl at the end of the picture. Likewise, Peck makes credible a series of believable, quick personality changes during the film, which add a depth to the bully he portrays. Mechlowicz plays a different sort of bully, and he keeps Marty's persona intact until one of the film's final scenes. Good work all around.

*Mean Creeks* opens Oct. 8 at the Bijou with high recommendations for its insight and development. **EW**

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