

Javier Bardem as "Ramon Sampedro" with Belén Rueda as "Julia"

A Lesson in Living And dying

THE SEA INSIDE (Spain, 2004): Directed, written and produced by Alejandro Amenábar. Produced by Fernando Bovaira. Written by Mateo Gil. Cinematography, Javier Aguirresarobe. Production design, Benjamin Fernández. Music, Alejandro Amenábar, with the special participation of Calos Núñez. Wardrobe, Sonia Grande. Starring Javier Bardem. With Belén Rueda, Lola Dueñas. Also Mabel Rivera, Tamar Novas, Celso Bugallo, Joan Dalmau, Clara Segura, Alberto Giménez José Maria Rou. Fine Line Features, 2004. PG-13. 125 minutes. 2004 Academy Award nomination for Foreign Language Film.

I'm sorry *The Sea Inside* was not available to be included in the most original films of 2004 (*EW* 3/24), because it deserves to be seen widely. Alejandro Amenábar's biography of real-life Ramón Sampedro at 55, beautifully played by Javier Barden, celebrates the life of an ordinary man who sued the government of Spain over his right to die. The case played out in the 1990s and elevated Sampedro to national celebrity. But more importantly, Ramón's efforts resulted in self-awareness rare in contemporary life. (Sampedro wrote a memoir, *Letters from Hell*.)

In the 30 years following Ramón's diving accident, he influenced many individuals as well as the Spanish court itself. Amenábar's film shows us the man himself, his intellect unimpaired and his observational powers honed to a fine edge. We meet his caregivers and butt up against his unwavering desire to die.

Let's begin with the basics: Since his accident, Ramón can move his head, but not his limbs. He breathes on his own but cannot move a finger. He chooses not use a wheelchair, so he spends his life in bed. A poet earlier in his life, he taps into his imagination and fantasizes flying across Galicia's wooded mountains, twisted ravines and streams to the Atlantic Ocean he longs to see again. As time passes, Ramón shares other fantasy experiences, and we marvel at how real they seem.

Ramón lives in an upstairs bedroom at his brother José's (Celso Bugallo) farmhouse, with his sister-in-law Manuela (Mabel Rivera), their quite old father Joaquin (Joan Dalmau), and his high-school aged nephew Javi (Tamar Novas). José is adamant and Joaquin determined to disallow Ramón the death he wants. Ravi has a complicated relationship with his uncle, but he loves him and has warm, forgiving encounters with him daily.

Only devoted Manuela says dying is what Ramón wants. Taking care of him tenderly and unsentimentally, Manuela says she loves him like a son. But the way she fumbles with the words suggests her love is less maternal

than she needs to believe. Rivera's performance is emotionally flawless.

Other people come into Ramón's life. Julia (Belén Rueda) is an attorney who helps with his court case, along with death with dignity advocates Gené (Clara Segura) and Marc (Francesc Garrido). Rosa (Lola

Dueñas) lives nearby. An impoverished single mother of two boys, Rosa recognizes Ramón as an attractive older man who tells her the truth. A Catholic bishop with multiple disabilities, played by José Maria Rou, comes to argue with Ramón. Their lively interaction is watched in wonder by the

priest's attendants in a scene that borders on cliché.

But who among these people will help Ramón to die? That's the question driving the narrative forward, as Amenábar sensitively shows us many faces of love. Ramón attracts women to him for a variety of reasons, and the intimacies he shares with Julia, Rosa and Manuela are as substantive as those of love stories involving temporarily able-bodied persons, as we should rightly think of ourselves.

Don't get the wrong message here. This is not a "message" film. It's a film about a former ship mechanic whose love of life sustains him but frustrates the stronger desire for death he harbors. If Ramón alone could end his life, there would be no story. But his

dependence on helpers to die runs against the laws of Spain. His patient attempts to win over others to his side are moving. But by the end of the film, we understand their point of view as well, because we, too, want this quietly powerful individual to stay onscreen for even a few minutes longer. **EW**

TERESA ISASI, FINE LINE FEATURES

Helping Out Compassion as an outdated emotion.

VERA DRAKE: Written and directed by Mike Leigh. Produced by Simon Channing Williams, Alain Sarde. Executive producers Gail Egan, Robert Jones, Duncan Reid. Cinematography, Dick Pope. Editor, Jim Clark. Production design, Eve Stewart. Music, Andrew Dickson. Costumes, Jacqueline Durran. Starring Imelda Staunton, with Phil Davis, Alex Kelly and Daniel Mays. Also with Adrian Scarborough, Heather Craney, Eddie Marsan, Lesley Manville, Sally Troughton, Ruth Sheen, Peter Wight and Helen Coker. Fine Line Features, 2004. R. 125 minutes.

Writer, director Mike Leigh is best known in this country for what some critics call "kitchen sink" melodramas, which I prefer to think of as character-driven domestic dramas. Leigh showed us the lives and travails of working class Brits in *High Hopes* (1988), *Life is Sweet* (1991) and *Secrets and Lies* (1996).

In that vein, *Vera Drake* explores the lives of a hard-working family during the shortages of Britain's post-WWII era. As Londoners made do during nightly bombing raids by Hitler's air force, so plucky individuals plugged away to make ends meet during the economic hard times that followed. Younger Americans may not have learned about efforts to help rebuild Britain and shore up its faltering economy at the end of that long, arduous war, but American schoolchildren donated food boxes, and charities delivered medicines. It was a time when families pulled together, and people helped each other.

I mention this because Mike Leigh doesn't, and everything in *Vera Drake* follows from this understanding. For most families, living was hard, and people worked where and how they could to survive. Vera cleans houses. She also provides a lot of services for free: making a cup of tea for to someone who can't get out, dropping by her mum's to cook dinner, helping out girls who get in trouble. That last, unpaid service is what gets Vera in trouble with the law.

Vera's husband Stan (Phil Davis) works in his brother Frank's (Adrian Scarborough) garage. Vera and Stan's son Sid (Daniel Mays) has a job but is always looking for a better (and easier) thing. Shy daughter Ethel (Alex Kelly) also brings in a bit of money from her job. Vera invites their bachelor neighbor, Reg (Eddie Marsan), for supper. Reg shows some interest in Ethel, and Vera and Stan seem genuinely happy together.

I think American movie audiences accept the notion that



Imelda Staunton and Phil Davis.

2004 SIMON WEIN, FINE LINE FEATURES

times were hard in some historical periods, such as during the Civil War or the settling of the Old West or the market failure that led to the Great Depression. But we have become a deeply materialistic society. No wars have been fought here since the 1860s. The last half of the 20th century saw long periods of affluence and abundance cut by shorter times of localized, economic slowdown. Oregonians know a lot about boom-and-bust cycles.

Mike Leigh's movies are always about class and economics, and in this film, he brings in gender politics. When Vera helps out a rich girl, Susan (Sally Hawkins), who was date-raped, things go wrong. The girl's parents despise Vera for class-related reasons, and the old friend and broker, Lily (Ruth Sheen), who sent Vera to the girl exploits her and collects money from the girls on the side. The authorities after Vera are overwhelmingly patriarchal figures, with the exception of WPC Best (Helen Coker), who is gentle and respectful with her.

But from Detective Inspector Webster (Peter Wight) to the police constable, the station sergeant, the station constable, the gaoler (jailer), the prosecution barrister and the magistrate, Vera faces a long sequence of men in positions of power. Her solemn demeanor and short stature lend themselves to the illusion that Vera actually tries to shrivel up and die rather than face their cold faces, troubling words and obvious distaste.

The film brings up strong, polarizing emotions about issues that resist easy resolution. Great performances, excellent direction, cinematography and editing make *Vera Drake* a must-see film. Don't wait. This may be its last hurrah. Highest recommendations for a disturbing and controversial film. **EW**