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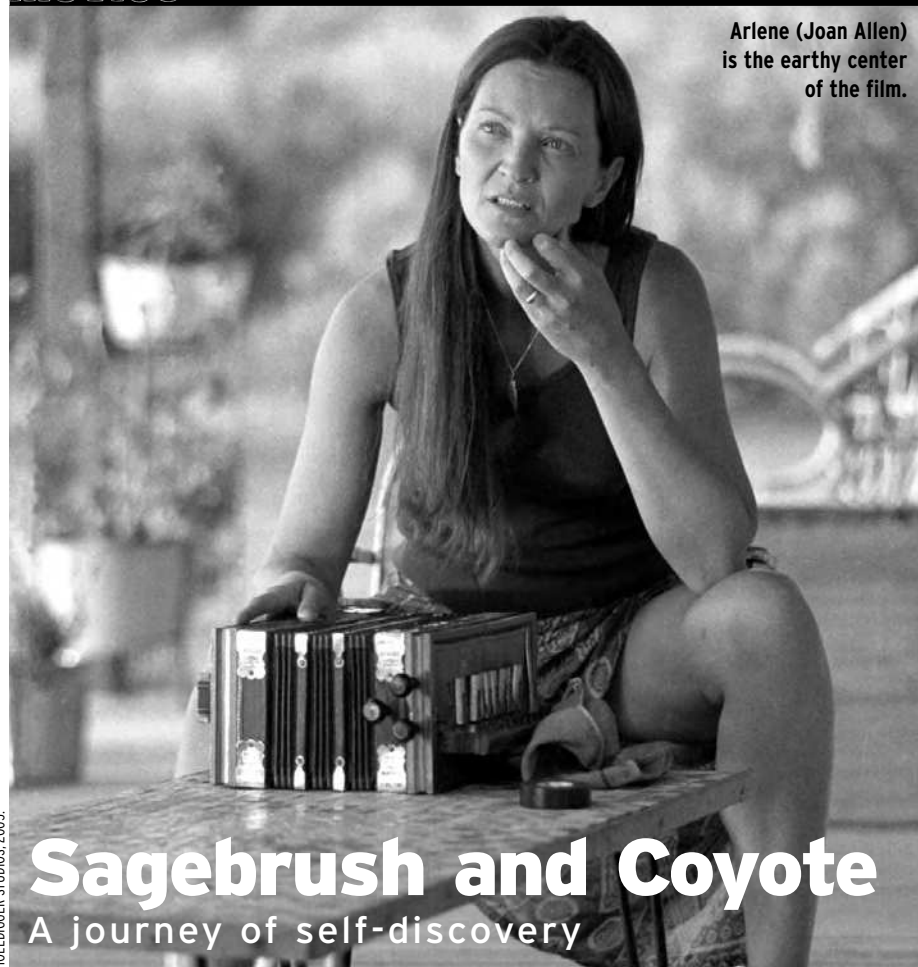
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movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH



Arlene (Joan Allen)
is the earthy center
of the film.

Sagebrush and Coyote

A journey of self-discovery

OFF THE MAP: Produced and directed by Campbell Scott. Written by Joan Ackermann, based on her play. Produced by George Van Buskirk. Executive producers: Paul E. Cohen, David Newman, Jonathan Filley, Nesim Hason, Ron Gell, Sezin Hason. Cinematographer, Juan Ruiz Anchia. Editor, Andy Keir. Production design, Chris Shriver. Composer, Cary DeMichele. Costume design, Amy Westcott. Artwork by Stan Bening. Starring Joan Allen, Valentina de Angelis, Sam Elliott, J.K. Simmons, Jim True-Frost and Amy Brenneman. Holedigger Films, 2005. PG-13. 111 minutes.

In 1974, the year Richard Nixon resigned the presidency to avoid impeachment, a small family living on ranch land outside of Taos, N.M., melted down in its own way. Charley (Sam Elliott), a Vietnam veteran, has descended into a deep depression from which he cannot extricate himself. His wife, Arlene (Joan Allen), tries to coax Charley out of his desolation, meanwhile taking up his chores and cajoling his best buddy, George (J.K. Simmons), to help her fix the car. Charley and Arlene's headstrong, home-schooled 11-year-old daughter Bo (Valentina de Angelis), reacts to her father's withdrawal through hunting with her bow or practice-shooting an old rifle she lugs around. Amy Brenneman ("Judging Amy") plays Bo as an adult. She is the film's narrator — a device leftover from the story's theater days that could have been scrapped.

Then one day, a stranger wanders up to the house. Bo watches from a platform near the windmill where she can't be seen. The man seems disoriented. Arlene is working in her garden, starkers. A coyote skulks nearby, hoping to catch a hen or a baby goat without being seen by the humans. In this cinematically layered sequence of hide and seek, only Bo sees it all. Arlene freezes so as not to scare the coyote into splitting, and the stranger, William (Jim True-Frost), freezes so as not to scare Arlene into putting on her clothes. Arlene is golden tan like the tall corn she stands among, clothed only with a clear, intelligent gaze and an uncomplicated sense of herself.

William turns out to be an IRS agent, who has spent a couple of days trying to find their isolated place. It's his new job, and he's not comfortable that he has come to audit their taxes. In fact, he's sick from a bee sting and

soon crashes on their couch, where a fever lays him low. Arlene and Bo give him food, water, kindness and rest. When he recovers, William realizes he has a lot in common with Charley, having been depressed all his life.

The narrative focus stays on Bo, who's too smart for her britches. While the girl comes up with a number of scams to get her dad well again, she also acts out and is too bratty for my taste. This is de Angelis's first film, and she may learn the actor's restraint practiced in *Finding Neverland* by 10-year-old Freddie Highmore's character, Peter, who needed to grieve for his recently deceased father.

When William begins painting, any notion of being a government man leaves his mind. If it follows that later William is "discovered" as a great artist, well that is one of the trendy Southwest fictions that haunts even the best of such films as this, made as they are by people who've never lived off the grid like this self-sufficient family.

Nevertheless, the film works its special enchantment, and the exquisite high desert land of northern New Mexico is as lovely as you would expect. This is a movie experience to be cherished, despite its flaws, primarily because of Allen's performance. Unlike the neurotic, alcoholic character she played flawlessly in *The Upside of Anger*, her Arlene is a gentle force of nature, earthy and genuine. She reminds me of the earth mothers I knew when I lived near Taos in the early 1970s with my children.

Director, producer Scott Campbell is also an actor I admire (*The Secret Lives of Dentists*), which helps him with the trio of men in the film. Elliott (*The Hulk*) makes Charley a man at the mercy of his inner demons but his wry humor keeps him from being an object of pity. Likewise, True-Frost (HBO's "The Wire") plays William as a nearly broken man who discovers a new way to overcome his past. Simmons ("Oz" and "Law and Order") shows George as a faithful vassal of the king who finally chooses the good things of life for himself.

Off the Map continues at the Bijou. Highly recommended. **EW**