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'Frozen River'

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Rating A

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This intense indie drama of unlikely female partners involved in a smuggling operation on the Canadian border is a bracing character study.

AS THE summer heats up, let "Frozen River" wash over you; let its bracing drama and the intensity of its acting restore your spirits as well as your faith in American independent film.

As those who have seen more than their share can testify, the all-purpose independent label guarantees only a modest budget and sometimes not even that. "Frozen River," however, is not only the deserved winner of the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, it also beautifully illustrates what the movement is supposed to be about.

Spare and un sentimental as well as intensely dramatic, character-based but grounded in reality and filled with involving incidents, "Frozen River's" account of two women who end up unlikely partners smuggling illegal immigrants over the Canadian border is very much the vision of writer-director Courtney Hunt, who told the story first as a short film before expanding it to feature length.

Hunt has not only created a powerful narrative, she also has cast the film with two exceptional actresses. **The formidably gifted but perennially underutilized Melissa Leo finally gets to carry a film**, and the relative newcomer Misty Upham has the skills to match up with her. Together, there is almost nothing they can't do.

"Frozen River's" virtues start with its unusual setting, the area around the town of Massena in upstate New York, just across the St. Lawrence River from Canada and also home to a Mohawk reservation that straddles the border. With Plattsburgh, N.Y. (on Lake Champlain), substituting for Massena, cinematographer Reed Morano uses digital video to make poetic use of bleak winter landscapes.

Director Hunt is just as adroit in creating the hardscrabble world its characters inhabit, an all-too-plausible universe of frustrated expectations and stunted existences, where lives are lived with a minimum of hope and an almost palpable sense of desperation. In a world like this, the worst could plausibly happen and nobody would even blink.

Ray Eddy (Leo) is introduced looking haunted and care-ravaged as she sits in a ratty bathrobe outside her rundown trailer home before heading off to minimum-wage work at the Yankee One Dollar store.

It's not long before we learn the reason for her distress. Her Mohawk husband, addicted to gambling, has run off with the money she has painfully scraped together to buy a much larger and more comfortable double-wide trailer for her family, including surly teenager T.J. (Charlie McDermott) and young Ricky (James Reilly).

Lila Littlewolf (Upham) is a young Mohawk woman who is estranged from the tribe but even more contemptuous of American culture in general and national governments in particular, insisting that she can do as she pleases on Mohawk land no matter what side of the border it falls on.

The paths of these women cross when Ray, searching for her husband, sees Lila, who works at a gambling club, driving off with her husband's car. A shot through the door of Lila's trailer gets the young woman's attention, and when she realizes she can't keep the car she tells Ray she knows someone who wants to buy it.

Before she knows it, Ray finds herself driving across the frozen St. Lawrence to Mohawk land in Canada, where her frantic need for money to pay for bare essentials (the standard family breakfast consists of popcorn and Tang) as well as that new trailer leads to involvement, almost against her will, in a scheme to smuggle immigrants into the U.S.

One of the strengths of "Frozen River" is the way it initially emphasizes how unlikely partners, like fire and ice, these two exceptionally tough women are. Ray is furious about her husband's disappearance and anyone connected with it, and the sullen Lila is mad at the world and given to saying biting things like "I don't usually work with whites." These two don't want to be on the same planet, let alone work together, and their powerhouse confrontations are the heart of the film.

Yet, due to the vagaries of smuggling, these women end up spending considerable time with each other, and that proximity leads to a kind of guarded familiarity. Lila's anger at her situation is so intense it inevitably leaks out, and we gradually hear her story as well.

Though they don't necessarily see it themselves, we come to understand how much these exhausted women, both tired of being on the short end of the stick, have in common. One of the questions "Frozen River" asks is how much that communality will mean in the context of an uncaring, unforgiving world. It is a powerful question, and the film answers it in the best way possible.

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"Frozen River." MPAA rating: R for some language. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. In limited release.