

Sexual Frustration Reigns Supreme in 'North Sea Texas'

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Coming of age dramas are a dime a dozen in Hollywood, but few are ever brave enough to grapple with the profound transitions that occur during one's teenage years. Young American moviegoers' first encounter with foreign cinema is often the result of their search for honest and unflinching portraits of sexual awakening and discovery. In terms of sheer maturity, American movies are still woefully below the curve set by most countries.

One of the best films of the last decade was Céline Sciamma's "Tomboy," a captivating French drama about a 10-year-old girl who dresses in boyish clothing and develops feelings for one of her female friends. The picture offered a hopeful twist on Kimberly Peirce's "Boys Don't Cry" by accentuating the healing that occurs when one is true to one's own identity. Sciamma proved to be as skilled as the Dardenne Brothers in her approach to directing child actors, while somehow finding the impeccably delicate note for each potentially risqué scene.

I couldn't help being frequently reminded of "Tomboy" while watching Belgian filmmaker Bavo Defurne's feature directorial effort, "North Sea Texas," a picture of similar ambition. Based on Andre Sollié's novel, Defurne's film has the uneven rhythm of a botched adaptation. Character motivations are left perplexingly enigmatic, while the protagonist, Pim (Jelle Florizoone), remains distressingly passive. Perhaps the film is a trifle too successful in externalizing Pim's dream-laden psyche, as each scene drifts to the next with a startling lack of urgency. Individual moments have great power but rarely do they gel in satisfying fashion. This stylistic choice may have been intentional, since the overarching theme of the film is sexual frustration spawned from unrequited romance, yet that doesn't make the film any less frustrating. Its last-second stab at an upbeat finale is entirely unconvincing since it goes against everything we've learned about the characters during the preceding 90 minutes. Defurne is so determined to provide viewers with an alternative to the standard tragic gay romance (namely "Brokeback Mountain") that he fails to remain true to his own story. Yet with all that being said, it's still easy to see why this film garnered considerable acclaim at festivals last year. The fresh-faced cast is so convincing that they keep the audience transfixed even during the script's weakest patches.



Jelle Florizoone and Mathias Vergels star in Bavo Defurne's *North Sea Texas*.

Photo credit: Strand Releasing

Emerging as the tender yin to the brutal yang represented by Michaël R. Roskam's "Bullhead," "North Sea Texas" is yet another Dutch import that utilizes the border between Flanders and Wallonia as a metaphorical divide in its central male characters' identity. From an early age, Pim feels a primal compulsion to adorn himself with makeup and tiaras while lusting after his older neighbor, Gino (Mathias Vergels). After finding her son dressed like a princess, mum Yvette (Eva van der Gucht) cackles with amusement. Her utter lack of alarm could be seen as open-minded and progressive, but it's also indicative of her innate arrested development. She's really an embittered child herself, angered by the life that early motherhood prevented her from achieving. Yvette sees Pim as less of a son and more of a romantic rival whenever a gentleman caller comes calling. The jarring twists in the film's final act are meant to hint that Yvette has acted in the best interests of her son, but that notion is mawkishly sentimental at best. In a single scene change, Yvette goes from being a flawed yet loving caregiver to a reprehensible, self-involved jerk. This flaw is made all the more glaring by Pim's static, sad-eyed expression. He's all bottled emotion with no release, and so is the movie.

The most potent (and successful) scenes occur in the film's first two acts, as Pim and Gino share some deliriously erotic, hormonally charged moments together. Their rapid breaths and gasps are muted by the wind blustering through the grassy fields of their picturesque coastal town (Anton Mertens' cinematography paints some swooning compositions). Yet once Gino leaves Flanders and travels over the border, he begins to romance a girl with the hopes that it will cause his homosexual impulses to fade. This is a crushing development to Pim, but it would've meant more if the film hadn't time-jumped from its all-too-brief prologue to the boys' mutual infatuation, conveniently skipping over the early days of their budding lust. Gino has such scant screen time that Vergels has few opportunities to convey the feeling reverberating beneath his actions. Defurne wants the audience to think that Gino is a coward unable to embrace his orientation, but the film itself suggests otherwise. Gino comes off as more of a charismatic user who heartlessly toys with Pim's heart before swiftly leaving it in the dust. He's no more deserving of a happy ending than the wretched Yvette.



Jelle Florizoone and Mathias Vergels star in Bavo Defurne's *North Sea Texas*.

Photo credit: Strand Releasing

What nearly salvages the picture is its heartbreaking performance from newcomer Nina Marie Kortekaas as Gino's sister, Sabrina, a sensitive girl who develops a hopeless crush on Pim. Not only is she the most fully realized character in the film, but also the one with the most well-rounded arc. She embodies all of the anguish and disappointment that Pim feels in the presence of Gino, displaying all of the raw feeling that Pim is never allowed to expose (aside from a couple wide shots that mostly consist of him running away from the lens). This is Kortekaas' first film role, and she is a real find—beguiling, vulnerable, and in the end, exceptionally strong. The pangs of first heartache inevitably following the flutters of first love won't be the death of her, yet audiences will likely find themselves caring (and worrying) about Sabrina the most.

'North Sea Texas' stars Jelle Florizoone, Mathias Vergels, Nina Marie Kortekaas, Eva van der Gucht, Thomas Coumans, Katelijne Damen, Luk Wyns and Ben Van den Heuvel. It was written by Bavo Defurne and Yves Verbraeken and directed by Bavo Defurne. It opened February 15th at the Music Box. It is not rated.



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