



FILM: **THE STARLING GIRL**

FDG RATING: 3.7 😊😊😊😊⬜

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Laurel Parmet: *director*
Eliza Scanlen: *actress, Jem Starling*
Lewis Pullman: *actor, Owen Taylor*

DATE: April 21, 2024

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: THE STARLING GIRL

Discussion Summary written by Joan Gower

Jem Starling is a 17 year old girl turning into a young woman in a fundamental Christian cult community, trying to find her voice and her place as she experiences the feelings of a girl turning into a woman in a restrictive community. Her pastor has asked her parents to allow his younger son Ben to come courting Jem. He is an unremarkable boy with no social skills and she has no interest in him but has begun to develop feelings for his older more attractive brother in his late twenties, newly returned from Porto Rico with his wife. Owen is the youth pastor in the community. Her interest in Owen is clear. The youth pastor responds to her interest and he fairly aggressively pursues her sexually. He tells her that he and his wife have nothing in common, that she is only interested in gossip and babies. Jem and Owen believe their love is ordained by God.

Jem is choreographing a dance to a piece of music to be performed by herself and other girls at church. The woman critiquing the dance for final approval, who is Owen's wife, insists on a couple of changes. Jem is frustrated when she is told that a twirl in the dance shows too much leg so they should not raise their legs as they twirl. When it is pointed out that her solo part in the dance is more about drawing attention to herself than giving praise to God, Jem argues that this is not the case but has to change the choreography so that all the participants dance this part with her.

Meanwhile her father, a former country music musician with alcohol problems in his past starts drinking again on hearing of the death of a musician and friend from his past. When her relationship with Owen becomes known, most of the blame is centered on Jem and she is required to ask for forgiveness in front of the whole congregation, including Owen. Jem's father takes an overdose of her mother's pills and falls into a coma.

It is decided that Jem needs to go stay at a "Christian camp" where she will learn to repent before returning to the community. The day she is to leave, Owen shows up in his truck asking her to come away with him, apologizing for buying into his father's narrative and stating again that they were meant to be together. Her mother tries to send him packing, slaps him hard enough to make him bleed and declares "you knew exactly what you were doing." Jem grabs her bag, jumps in his truck and they take off. Later that night, a clearly torn Jem is trying to decide what she should do, asking God to help her feel content and calm. In the early hours of the morning Jem steals Owen's keys and starts driving to Memphis. Years prior her father had a residency at Arleen's Bar in Memphis. She enters the bar looking around in wonder. Sitting on a bar stool she asks to borrow a phone from the bartender. After studying the phone for a little while, Arleen sets it back on the counter and approaches the dance floor. Country music is playing in the background. As the movie ends Jem dances, lost in the music on the dance floor.

Comments

This film showcases repression in a fundamentalist Christian cult where allowed behavior is prescribed and strict adherence to the rules is expected. Participants noted that there was little individual choice and that when the affair was discovered, Jem had to ask the congregation for forgiveness whereas the youth pastor did not. One participant said she had internalized misogyny which included constant worrying about impure thoughts and actions. Another participant noted that it wasn't that long ago that girls were blamed for sexual misconduct as it was assumed that they were the ones who needed to stop guys from engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior. Eliza Scanlen gave a stellar performance as a conflicted Jem coming to terms with her own sexuality and emotions while trying to discover her own voice and path forward. Some participants were critical of the cliches which were evident but Jem's outstanding performance won them over. Strong performances by Lewis Pullman as Owen and Wrenn Schmidt who played Jem's mother. There was some speculation about the road ahead for Jem as the movie ended. Several people believed that Jem would not return to the community but forge her own path forward while a couple thought she might call her mother and return home. Jem's love of dance and the fact that she was dancing at the end of the movie meant she was ready to move on with her own life one reviewer suggested.

Rating: 3.7 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best)



See you at the movies!
Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net
www.filmdiscussiongroup.com