

Song of Silence

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A plaintive ballad about a hearing-impaired teenager trying to find her place in a fractured family.

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“Song of Silence” is a plaintive ballad about a hearing-impaired teenager trying to find her place in a fractured family. First-time helmer Chen Zhuo demonstrates tact and perceptiveness when exploring his protag’s fragile inner world as she stumbles to make sense of and assert her blossoming sexuality. Regrettably, however, the film’s crass stylistic pretensions frequently jar with the low-key realism achieved by his quietly engaging characters, finely tuned non-professional perfs and vividly evoked southern-central Chinese setting, muffling the helmer’s message and individual voice. Pic is unlikely to blossom beyond fest play.

Hearing-impaired Jing (Yin Yaning) attends a regular school in a fishing village and is being raised by her single mother (Tang Hui), but doesn’t get along with Mom’s new b.f. When Jing is deemed inappropriately close to her mentally challenged uncle (Yu Xuan), she is sent to live temporarily with her estranged father, policeman Zhang Haoyang (Li Qiang). Neither Zhang nor Mei (Wu Bingbin), his pregnant club-singer g.f., is thrilled to have her around, though the awkward thawing of the trio’s relations is played out to riveting and moving effect in scenes that include angry brawls, meaningful silences and songs full of longing.

Proud and petulant, yet at times revealing flashes of deep love and

tenderness, Jing is a complex character, yet she could be any girl on the cusp of womanhood. Neither focusing on her disability nor painting her as an object of pity, Yin allows Jing to bloom by developing a range of emotions and non-verbal self-expression. Meanwhile, Mei, a sexually bold misfit, turns out to be needier and more childlike than Jing; Wu contrasts strongly with her mute counterpart in a self-centered role that avoids tipping over into obnoxiousness.

Drawing on a real incident, Chen clearly gets under his characters' skin, but his use of the kind of one-size-fits-all lensing and editing techniques typical of China's independent filmmakers proves a poor fit with the non-pro cast's excellent, naturalistic playing. Unable to find his own voice, the helmer forces in magical elements, like recurring images of dead goldfish and a tacky dream sequence.

Shot in Chen's native Changsha (capital of Hunan province) and Xiangtan (Mao Zedong's hometown), lenser Shi Yue juxtaposes the city's urban buzz with reposeful images of Yangmeizhou (the pic's Chinese title), the lone isle in the center of the mist-cloaked Xiang River. Tech credits are passable.