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Author(s)	Dennis Harvey
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AM I SEXY?

(BIN ICH SEXY?)

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(GERMANY)

A Maran Film production in association with ZDF and MFG. Produced by Martin Bach, Annette Koster. Co-producer, Annedore von Donop.

Directed by Katinka Feistl. Screenplay, Sabine Brodersen. Camera (color), Daniela Knapp; editors, Tina Freitag, Doreen Krambeer; music, Moritz Denis, Eike Hosenfeld; production designer, Juliane Friedrich; costumes, Bettina Marx; sound editor (Dolby), Angelo D'Angelico. **Reviewed at Berlin & Beyond Film Festival**, San Francisco, Jan. 8, 2005. Running time: 89 MIN.

With: Marie-Luise Schramm, Birge Schade, Andreas Schmidt, Johanna Fritz, Ismail Streit, Faria Nada, Dietz Werner Steck, Ahmet Olgun, Isabel Hindersi.

By DENNIS HARVEY

A skillful portrait of a painful adolescence in problematic family circumstances,

Katinka Feistl's debut feature "Am I Sexy?" finds seriocomic middle ground, equal-distant between a feel-good after-school special and a worst-scenario teenpic like "Thirteen." Sophisticated young viewers and parents alike should appreciate pic's uncondescending, warts-and-all warmth, though offshore sales may be limited by pic's very European family movie content — which doesn't shy from showing mom in the bathtub and in bed with her suitor. Winner of the audience award at the Lunen, Germany, film festival, pic should continue to be a fest crowdpleaser.

Eldest of three children, 15-year-old Mareike (Marie-Luise Schramm) is frequently at odds with her siblings, and her harried single-again mother Jutta (Birge Schade). All of them are still reacting to the car accident death of the biological father of the youngest child Timmi (Ismail Streit) who was deeply loved by the whole family.

Fearful Timmi has started wetting the bed again; little Franca (Johanna Fritz) has transferred her fear of death and abandonment into militant vegetarianism. Unconsciously seeking male approval, Mareike fixates on becoming a glamorous model — a somewhat forlorn hope, since her face and figure are of the pleasingly plump variety.

Jutta scoffs at her daughter's absurd aspirations. But Mareike is determined enough to raise funds for modeling school herself, working at an open-air market where she develops a major crush on an older boy (Ahmet Olgun).

Meanwhile, still-grieving Jutta is having a hard time accepting the genuine fondness of Winnie (Andreas Schmidt), a men's wear salesman at the department store where she works as security chief.

Already full narrative agenda risks overload when teenage heroine develops an obscure medical condition that causes her to lose all her hair. But Feistl's direction keeps everything emotionally grounded, even when Sabine Brodersen's generally sharp screenplay piles on the traumas a bit too thick.

Both juvenile and adult roles are beautifully handled, as are the delicate emotional complications between the characters. Only a rather trite closing note feels formulaic.

Tech and design elements are sharp if unremarkable; pic won't lose much in transition to the small screen, which reps its natural destination for long-term shelf life.