

Document Citation

Title	Limbo
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1999 May 31
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	28
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Limbo, Sayles, John, 1999



ICED TEEN: Vanessa Martinez is a troubled daughter living in Alaska in writer-director John Sayles' "Limbo" from Screen Gems.

matographer Haskell Wexler, by showing so little of Juneau and surroundings. Keeping the film in relative closeup may help the characters, but withholding shots of the little-seen city and the state of which it is the capital denies the picture a texture and richness it could otherwise have had.

LIMBO

(DRAMA)

A Sony Pictures Entertainment release of a Screen Gems presentation of a Green/Renzi production. Produced by Maggie Renzi.

Directed, written, edited by John Sayles. Camera (CFI color), Haskell Wexler; music, Mason Daring; production designer, Gemma Jackson; art director, Keith Neely; set designer, Marco Rubeo; set decorator, Brian Kasch; costume designer, Shay Cunniffe; sound (Dolby/ SDDS), Judy Karp; associate producer, Sarah Connors; assistant director, John Powditch; second unit director, Sandy McLeod; second unit camera, Larry Goldin; casting, Lizzie Martinez. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 22, 1999. (In Sydney Film Festival, opener.)** MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 126 MIN.

Donna De Angelo Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio
Joe Gastineau David Strathairn
Noelle De Angelo Vanessa Martinez
Smilin' Jack Kris Kristofferson
Bobby Gastineau Casey Siemaszko
Frankie Kathryn Grody
Lou Rita Taggart
Harmon King Leo Burmester
Albright Michael Laskin

By TODD McCARTHY

Limbo" is half-priced Sayles. After a promising opening in which numerous interesting aspects of life in modern Alaska are laid out, the potentially fascinating social dynamics are dropped in favor of a thinly realized survival tale that falls flat dramatically and cinematically. Compared to John Sayles' more densely textured evocations of very specific American milieus, this rare attempt to say something about the country's largest but possibly least known state comes as a particular disappointment. Initial entry from Sony's new Screen Gems banner looks headed for spotty biz.

In such films as "Matewan," "City of Hope," "Passion Fish" and "Lone Star," Sayles has proven unusually sensitive to the cultural distinctions of highly diverse and flavorsome geographic locations. At the outset, it looks as though "Limbo" might be headed in the same rewarding direction.

The opening couple of reels lay out such dichotomies as the decline of traditional pursuits like fishing versus the rise of tourism; the belief in unfettered capitalism and exploitation of local resources versus ecological concerns; the tensions between longtime residents and newcomers; and divergent notions of Alaska as a destination of last resort and a place where you can reinvent yourself and get a fresh start.

Caught somewhere between the latter two states of mind is Donna De Angelo (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), a talented 40ish singer whose bad luck has landed her in Juneau

taking gigs on cruise ships, at barbecues and in a local honkytonk.

Dragged throughout the country all her life, Donna's attractive but sullen daughter Noelle (Vanessa Martinez), now in her late teens, has never known her father; despite her mother's industriousness and loving attitude toward her, Noelle has learned not to get her hopes up or put any stock in her mom's promises.

Donna has at least managed to keep her career going, which is more than she can say for her relationships with men. This is a woman who has clearly knocked around a lot, and by her own admission, she's shown lousy judgment, which has also affected her relationship with her daughter.

Just as she's breaking up with a member of her band, she meets a local jack-of-all-trades, middle-aged Joe Gastineau (David Strathairn), and pretty quickly makes clear her interest in him.

Although he's an Alaska native, Joe has bounced around a good deal himself. Affable, self-contained, alert, restrained but warm, Joe used to be a fisherman but quit 25 years earlier when his boat went down, taking his two passengers with it. He survived, but since then, as the local bartender says, "Joe's not the same guy." A high school basketball star whose career was abruptly

some men on unspecified business.

Donna, the antithesis of an outdoorswoman, agrees to come along with Noelle, and a sudden gale is only an appetizer for their next problem: Bobby is murdered, and Joe, Donna and Noelle have to swim for their lives to a nearby island with no provisions and only the skimpiest clothes.

Pic's final 45 minutes take place on the remote, uninhabited island, and what must have been intended as a stern test of what three people are truly made of quickly turns dull, simplistic and, finally, evasive.

Sayles lets himself down here both as writer and director. While he presents the threesome, under Joe's reasonably reassuring guidance, hunkering down to survive until help might come, he has Noelle read nightly from a diary left by another girl who, from the evidence, went through hell with her family in the very cabin where they're staying. Unfortunately, these readings are presented straightforwardly, with the camera just showing Noelle reading, which simply becomes boring despite the increasingly harsh contents.

Beyond that, Sayles' strengths do not include building tension and suspense. This final act desperately needs both qualities, but they are utterly lacking — a problem compounded by an open-ended finale that's meant to be haunting but comes off as a silly and frustrating cop-out.

Unfulfilling narrative wastes considerable character building by Mastrantonio, Strathairn and Martinez, all of whom sculpt credible portraits of individuals with considerable potential (Noelle shows outstanding promise as a writer) hobbled by the cards life has dealt them. Most of the characters introduced as a promising supporting cast are dropped midway, as are Sayles' sociopolitical takes.

Technical work is decent, although the director has put undue limits on his ace frequent collaborator, cine-

Final act desperately needs tension and suspense.

finished by a blown-out knee, Joe has had to live with severely lowered expectations and guilt ever since, and appears to have done a decent job of it.

The build-up to Donna and Joe's romance is handled in emotionally plausible if leisurely fashion, with time-outs for several tunes from Donna (the formally trained Mastrantonio's voicings are exceptionally fine, comparable to those of any number of singing stars) and assorted sideline vignettes: Donna gently rebuffs romantic advances from a smooth local bush pilot named Smilin' Jack (Kris Kristofferson), while Joe begins fishing again at the behest of two recently arrived lesbians (Kathryn Grody, Rita Taggart), tough businesswomen who have taken over a bitter local man's boat and license. Noelle assumes a back seat during most of the first hour, although there are disturbing moments when she expresses her deep hurt through tentative acts of self-mutilation.

Everything changes with the arrival of Joe's half-brother Bobby (Casey Siemaszko), a slick-talking hustler from California who hasn't seen his bro in six years and didn't even come up when their father died recently. Bobby talks a reluctant Joe into taking him out for a two-day run on his boat to meet