Film Review: ‘Allure’

As a disturbed young woman who becomes a victimizer, Evan Rachel Wood proves again that she’s a great actress and a star.

By Owen Gleiberman
Why isn’t Evan Rachel Wood a major movie star? I mean a star on the level of Jennifer Lawrence, Kristen Stewart, Angelina Jolie? In “Allure,” she’s got a bloom on her — clear eyes, ravishing grin, two-tone hair swept back and parted in the middle, a look that’s pristine in its punk elegance. (She suggests a more open, less halting Kristen Stewart.) Yet she gives a performance of such accomplished anguish that it seems dragged out of the lower depths.

Wood plays Laura, who works for her father’s company doing house-cleaning in an unnamed city that’s cozy, tree-lined, and overcast; it looks like it could be Portland or the Toronto suburbs. When Laura has to, she presents a face to the world that’s calm and sweet and happy, but inside she’s a wreck, a broken howl of rage from her childhood. What makes Wood a star is the way she weaves those two dimensions together: her look and her torment. She uses her placid beauty to suggest that people who have been mentally damaged don’t necessarily broadcast that reality; they keep it hidden, until it spews out of them. And when it does...well, the power with which Wood expresses a life of pain will knock the wind out of you. It’s like seeing the young Liv Ullmann channel millennial nihilistic despair.

Is the movie as good as she is? Not quite. But it’s subtle and absorbing, visualized with a sophisticated gloom that stays with you. The filmmakers, Carlos and Jason Sanchez, are directors of music videos and commercials who’ve become known in Canada for their museum exhibits of photographs that are reminiscent of movie stills. This is their first feature film, and they have a knack for imagistic atmosphere, for how to use a setting — like Laura’s boxy home, with its dilapidated decor and humdrum lighting — to suggest all kinds of things about the person who occupies it. In their low-key way, the Sanchezes understand the train-wreck drama of dysfunction. They keep the audience off-balance the same way Laura does.

The movie opens with a sex scene in which erotic frenzy spills into violence: Laura is with some dumpy guy, who’s blindfolded, and she’s using him like a drug to arouse herself — straddling him, hitting him, ratcheting up her own intensity. You can’t just go through the motions of a scene like this one (though plenty of actresses do), and Wood heads right to a place where anger feeds, like a loop, into desire. Her portrayal of dark sexuality is fearless.

On her first day cleaning the house of a new client, Laura meets Eva (Julia Sarah Stone), the girl who lives there. She’s 16, a little shy but poised, an accomplished classical pianist who spends hours a day practicing — but she’s at war with her mother (Maxime Roy), who plans to sell the house and move the two of them in with her latest boyfriend, a prospect that fills Eva with horror. Laura spots the Nirvana poster on the girl’s wall and bonds with her over that, but she can also feel her unhappiness. It’s something she just about teases out with her scent.

She invites Eva over to her place, mixing up some cheap vodka and orange juice, and they have almost too good a rapport, since Laura, who’s around 30, is really an arrested teenager herself; she’s still tapping into rebel postures aimed at all the wrong targets. She’s humane enough to empathize with Eva’s
predicament, but she’s also manipulative enough to use it for her own ends. The actress Julia Sarah Stone looks like a very comely mouse, but she’s not mousy — she’s alive with curiosity. When Laura ask Eva to stay over, Eva thinks that she’s being beckoned into a refuge, and it is, but it’s also a trap. Someone like Laura isn’t a friend. She’s a parasite.

Little by little, the movie colors in Laura’s background, and we can tell, from the start, that something is off in her relationship with her father, William (Denis O’Hare), who does all he can, and then some, to look after her. He’s trying to save her, but it doesn’t take psychological rocket science to see that he’s the one she needs saving from. “Allure” is a lacerating snapshot of what abuse really does: how it can tear away someone’s identity. When Laura locks Eva in a room by propping a chair against the door, it’s only then that we realize she’s seriously mentally ill, yet Wood’s performance doesn’t allow the audience to compartmentalize that. If anything, she draws us into a conspiracy that emerges out of Laura’s vulnerability.

As for Eva, she enters into a kind of teenage Stockholm syndrome, becoming too bonded to Laura to escape. There were moments where I thought, “I’m not buying this,” and then a moment later I thought, “Yes, I am.” The actresses connect and flow together, creating characters who collude in leaving the real world behind, which is something that can seriously happen. The audience knows it can’t last — the only question is how it will fall apart — and in the daring final moments, Laura is stripped of all her insulation, yet almost nothing is resolved. “Allure” is too stark to have much chance of finding a major profile as an independent release. Yet it deserves a life in theaters, because it’s a testament to the fire of Evan Rachel Wood’s talent.

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Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Discovery), Sept. 12, 2017. Running time: 105 MIN. (Original title: “A Worthy Companion”)

PRODUCTION: (Canada) A micro_scope production. Producers: Luc Déry, Kim McCraw.


WITH: Evan Rachel Wood, Julia Sarah Stone, Denis O’Hare, Maxim Roy.