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Liberty Kid

Bottom Line: This low-key character drama takes a fresh look at some unheralded victims of Sept. 11.

By Stephen Farber

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Los Angeles Film Festival

Audiences have shied away from gritty dramas about Sept. 11 and its aftermath, as evidenced by the lackluster boxoffice response to "A Mighty Heart." So there are challenges facing "Liberty Kid," a powerful drama that had its premiere in the narrative competition section at the Los Angeles Film Festival. Writer-director Ilya Chaiken deserves credit for offering a novel slant on the tragedy. Instead of confronting the attacks head-on, the film focuses on two young men whose lives are drastically affected by the events of Sept. 11, 2001. Working with tact and subtlety, Chaiken reminds us of the wide-ranging repercussions of this national trauma.

Derrick (Al Thompson) and Tico (Kareem Savinon) are Latino friends from Brooklyn who work in the concessions stand on Liberty Island. When the Statue of Liberty is closed down after Sept. 11, the guys find themselves unemployed and increasingly desperate. Tico leads Derrick into some small-time drug dealing and insurance scams, but Derrick wants to make a respectable living and eventually is tempted to join the Army on the eve of the Iraq invasion.

Without a large budget at her disposal, Chaiken is forced to deal indirectly with the momentous political events of the past five years. Still, she manages to tell us a great deal about the diverse lives affected by these national crises.

Chaiken, the director of the 2001 Sundance Film Festival hit "Margarita Happy Hour," works with a delicate touch. She has a gift for oblique storytelling, which pays off in the surprise revelation that a girl courted by Derrick ends up living with Tico. The treatment of Derrick's devastating experiences in Iraq confirms the director's skill. There was no budget for combat scenes, so the film focuses on his disorientation after his return. A brief scene in which he hears gunshots and is startled by a couple of hooded figures does an economical job of capturing his post-traumatic stress disorder. For a while, he is reduced to living in his car, which makes its own comment on the losses faced by so many Iraq War veterans.

There are times when the film might be too enigmatic. Some of the back stories are frustratingly unexplored. We learn little about Derrick's family or what happened to the mother of his two children. The film also veers perilously close to cliché in episodes of the drug dealing and petty crime. But these banal stretches are more than balanced by the effectively natural acting.

Thompson as the responsible but impressionable Derrick and Savinon as the more volatile Tico give potent, thoroughly believable performances. Much of the byplay between them has a relaxed, improvisatory feel, and the actors convince us of the solidity of the bond between them. Supporting performances also are strong, though one wishes some of the family members were more carefully delineated in the script.

Despite the low budget, the technical credits are proficient. Even though "Liberty Kid" is a small film, much of it is deeply poignant; it enhances our compassion for all the ghosts of Sept. 11. Its cautiously optimistic conclusion also strikes a welcome note without falling into sentimentality.

LIBERTY KID

Glass Eye Pix in association with Ring the Jing Entertainment

Credits:

Director-screenwriter: Ilya Chaiken

Producers: Larry Fessenden, Mike S. Ryan, Roger Kass

Executive producers: Claude Wasserstein, Andrea Van Beuren

Director of photography: Eliot Rockett

Production designer: Jesse Cain

Music: Jeff Grace

Co-producer: Mike King

Costume designer: Nyka Milburn

Editor: Dave Rock

Cast:

Derrick: Al Thompson

Tico: Kareem Savinon

Denice: Raquel Jordan

Awilda: Rosa Ramos

Sister: Anny Mariano

Nelson: Johnny Rivera

Mike: Rayniel Rufino

Running time -- 90 minutes

No MPAA rating

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