

“To be a legend, you’ve either got to be dead or excessively old!”

— Christopher Lee, veteran of seven decades of screen work, including in the “Lord of the Rings” and “Star Wars” films, who died this past weekend at age 93



FILM

LIFE AND DEATH

‘Dying Girl’ aims to make sense of it all

By ERIC ALTHOFF
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Teens seldom, if ever, pause to contemplate their own mortality, viewing death as an abstract concept that happens solely to the elderly and to video game characters. One of the strongest qualities of the film “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,” opening Friday, is that it takes a poignant yet humorous approach to Rachel, a young woman battling leukemia, as seen through the eyes of Greg, the boy who unwittingly befriends her.

“When your best friend is suddenly gone, how do you make sense of it?” said director Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, who lost his father not long into his film’s gestation. “I was hoping that by making this movie that I would start to integrate that into my life, and do it through a comedy and walk away feeling that there is some sort of continuum, even if the shape isn’t that well-defined of that person. I found a way [through this film] to say what I was feeling.”

A frequent critique of teen films is that the young people portrayed act and speak like adults. In “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl,” based on a book by Jesse Andrews, Greg (Thomas Mann), Earl (RJ Cyler) and Rachel (Olivia Cooke) act their age — by turns awkward, shy, hopeful and confused.

“I wasn’t interested in portraying adolescents as really cynical or too cool,” Mr. Gomez-Rejon said. “But I did want to spend time with them and learn from them.”

“I don’t think we’re talking down to teenagers” in the film, said Miss Cooke, who plays a young woman stricken with cancer. “I don’t think these characters are written as stereotypes. The grown-up characters aren’t written as stereotypes either. They’re all fleshed-out real characters that have real dialogue. No one’s trying to say the most profound thing or the perfect thing in the moment.”

Miss Cooke, a British actress, affected American mannerisms and accent for the film. In addition to studying regional accents and speech patterns — the film was shot in Pittsburgh — Miss Cooke researched her character by visiting the children’s ward at UCLA to meet young people afflicted with cancer, which she said helped her get “physically and mentally in a different state” for her depiction of Rachel’s decreasing health.

“Saturday Night Live” alumna Molly Shannon portrays Rachel’s mother, Denise, who deals with her daughter’s illness with the help of a smile, poorly timed attempts at gallows humor and an ever-full glass of red wine.

“She’s really, really funny and interested and so curious about your life,” Miss Cooke said of her on-screen mother, “and she’s so chatty.”

Mr. Gomez-Rejon also said the film helped him work through some of the pain of his own adolescence, during which, he said, “I did nothing but watch movies.”

Indeed, Greg and Earl are amateur filmmakers who remake their favorite films as cheaply and quickly as possible. “I was very quiet, very shy and insecure,” Mr. Gomez-Rejon said, “but by the [end of high school] I was starting to get that confidence and knowing what I wanted to do with my life.”

The heart of the film entails Greg’s visits to Rachel’s bedroom and sick ward, where the two speak on all manner of subjects in the often-uneasy parlance of adolescents trying to define their own identities and learning how to relate to the opposite sex.

Mr. Gomez-Rejon said he knew he had his duo when Mr. Mann, during auditions, had such an easy and natural repartee with Miss Cooke, who had already been cast as Rachel.

“The three of them have to have the right kind of energy flow,” Mr. Gomez-Rejon said of Miss



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Thomas Mann was cast with Olivia Cooke in “Me and Earl and The Dying Girl” because of their repartee.

Cooke, Mr. Mann and Mr. Cyler, who plays Greg’s young friend and fellow filmmaker. “Olivia came first, and then you start doing chemistry reads. And then there has to be a chemistry [between Greg and Rachel] that doesn’t seem sexual, because the film is going to go in a different direction. Then you find the right Earl who works in the mix, both individually and as a triptych.”

“We became fast friends,” Miss Cooke said of her co-star, Mr. Mann, with whom she shares most of her on-screen time.

While “Me and Earl and the Dying Girl” is high on laughter — not least because of Greg and Earl’s

poor “remakes” of their favorite films — Rachel’s precarious health is ever-present. Mr. Gomez-Rejon said that unflinching examination of the possibility of young death is important for the characters and for the audience.

“I was hoping that by making something that I would work through some of my feelings [and] that I would leave something behind that maybe other people would find comfort in,” he said.

As equally important is keeping alive the memories of those who have gone before us. In that spirit, the film is dedicated to Mr. Gomez-Rejon’s late father, Julio.

Get Out

The week’s pocket picks

By SAMANTHA SAULT

Jazz

Jazz at the Yards

The highlight of the DC Jazz Festival takes place this weekend at Yards Park at Capitol Riverfront, featuring two days of performances by contemporary jazz artists and plus outdoor fun for all ages



at the beautiful urban oasis near Nationals Stadium. On Friday, Jazz at the Yards features several free performances by Sharon Clark, Cubano Groove, and New Orleans’ eight-piece ensemble The Soul Rebels. On Saturday, purchase tickets to see big names such as Grammy Award winner Esperanza Spalding, Common, and Femi Kuti & the Positive Force. Splurge for premier tickets for reserved seating areas near the stage and other perks, or purchase a general admission ticket and bring a lawn chair or blanket. On both days, enjoy a food and beverage marketplace, tastings and chef demonstrations, and other family-friendly activities.

Friday and Saturday at the Yards Park at Capitol Riverfront, 355 Water St. SE. Web: DCJazzFest.org.



Film

AFI Docs



Escape the humidity for a cool movie theater to catch some of the most important new documentaries. Beginning Wednesday, AFI Docs will feature 81 films from 25 countries, including four world premieres, with screenings, discussions and special events at Silver Spring’s AFI Silver Theatre and other venues. The festival opens with “Best of Enemies,” set in 1968, when ABC hired Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley Jr. as commentators for the presidential election. The screening will be followed by a discussion with directors Morgan Neville and Robert Gordon. Other picks include “Mavis,” following R&B singer and civil rights activist Mavis Staples, and “All Things Must Pass,” Colin Hanks’ exploration of the demise of Tower Records and what it means for music. Many films take critical looks at the world, including photojournalists working to establish a free press in Afghanistan (“Frame by Frame”) and human trafficking in Cambodia (“The Storm Makers”). On June 19, head to Silver Spring’s Fountain Plaza for a free screening of “Close, Ride, Rise, Roar,” electronic musician Brian Eno’s film about the Talking Heads’ David Byrne. **Wednesday through June 21 at the AFI Silver Theatre, Silver Spring, Maryland, and other venues in the Washington area. 301/495-6700. Web: AFI.com.**



Concert

Vertical Horizon

You know Vertical Horizon, one of the quintessential alternative rock bands of the late 1990s, but you may not know that it got its start playing covers at Georgetown University parties. Formed in 1991 by undergrads Matthew Scannell and Keith Kane, the band produced a few albums and toured the country before releasing its smash 1999 album, “Everything You Want,” which propelled Vertical Horizon to mainstream success and sold over 2 million copies in the United States. The band released several more albums, including its most recent in 2013, “Echoes From the Underground,” and is now touring with a stop at the Howard Theatre on Wednesday. Expect to hear hits such as “Everything You Want,” “You’re A God,” “Save Me From Myself” and “Best I Ever Had (Grey Sky Morning).” **Wednesday at the Howard Theatre, 620 T St. NW. 202/803-2899. Web: TheHowardTheatre.com.**



Dining

Virginia Cheese Festival

This weekend, take a drive a few hours outside of Washington to Blacksburg, Virginia, home of the Virginia Tech Hokies and some really great cheese. From 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, the city will host the first-ever Virginia Cheese Festival, where visitors can try local artisan cheeses expertly paired with beers and wines. Activities throughout the day will include cheese-making demonstrations and workshops, live music, displays of regional art, and a petting zoo, face painting and other activities for children. Arrive early to participate in the 5K Rat Race and 1-mile fun run/walk, and indulge in your cheese guilt-free. **Saturday at the**

Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech, 190 Alumni Mall, Blacksburg, Virginia. 540/443-2008. Web: VirginiaCheese-Festival.com.