

Billy the Kid

Bottom Line: This revealing documentary about a teenage misfit will haunt viewers.

By Stephen Farber

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Los Angeles Film Festival

Many memorable dramatic films about adolescence have been made over the decades, but few of them can match the impact of "Billy the Kid," a striking, heartfelt documentary that deserves to have a long shelf life. Director Jennifer Venditti is a casting director who was interviewing high school kids in Maine for a short film. She came upon a young teenage boy, Billy Price-Baker, who didn't seem to fit with the other kids at his school, and she became intrigued by him and decided to see if she might gain entry into his world. Billy and his mother agreed to talk with her and share some of their secrets.

What emerged is a portrait quite unprecedented in its candor and poignancy. Billy reveals the emotional problems that have plagued him since childhood. At one point, school administrators recommended that he be placed in a special school. His mother refused to accept their diagnosis, and it becomes clear that she was right. Billy's problems are not so different from typical adolescent alienation, and he clearly is a perceptive and bright boy who deserves a supportive environment where he might have a chance to flourish.

Venditti followed Billy around and made him comfortable enough so that he opens up about the dark thoughts that he harbors, partly attributable to his history with an abusive father. Even more remarkable, while filming is under way Billy begins a tentative romance with Heather, a girl he courts at the local diner. The flush of first love rarely has been caught with such tenderness, and when the flirtation comes to a sudden end we're affected by the desolation that Billy feels.

The film doesn't force a conclusion on us. It allows us to see that Billy has the potential to become dangerously antisocial, but he has a rock-solid ally in his mother, who proves to be far more generous and complicated than first impressions suggest. Like the best docu, "Billy the Kid" introduces us to some unique characters. Technically it's fairly simple but just accomplished enough to keep us riveted. Cinematographer Donald Cumming captures the small-town New England ambience. The movie's main virtue is its intimacy; it takes us astonishingly close to its characters, and this is a tribute to the trust and empathy that Venditti and her unobtrusive crew achieved. One hopes that the film finds a life in theaters, then on television and DVD, where it will last as an indelible record of adolescent turmoil.



BILLY THE KID

Eight Films and Isotope Films in association with IndiePix

Credits:

Director: Jennifer Venditti

Producers: Jennifer Venditti, Chiemi Karasawa

Executive producers: Barnet Liberman, Bob Alexander, Lubov Azria

Director of photography: Donald Cumming

Music: Christian Zucconi, Guy Blakeslee

Editors: Michael Levine, Enat Sidi

Running time – 85 minutes

No MPAA rating