



Billy The Kid

Denis Seguin in Toronto

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Dir. Jennifer Venditti. US. 2007. 85mins.

***Billy The Kid* ventures into a small, contained community to focus on a single life and thereby turns the camera on the world. The Grand Prize winner at SXSW in Austin, where it premiered in March, and an audience favourite at Hot Docs in Toronto, the film is gaining traction for its insight into a little understood disability known as Asperger's Syndrome, part of the autism spectrum. Still, this is no "freak show" film – Billy wasn't diagnosed until after filming was complete – but a privileged view through the eyes of a genuine iconoclast.**

Its theatrical prospects will hinge on continued success on the festival circuit – it plays, for example, in the Los Angeles Film Festival this month. Beautifully shot, it has the feel and texture of a feature rather than a TV effort. Not unlike Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation*, the film may be too much for some viewers to embrace.

Still, Asperger's Syndrome, and indeed autism, is a hot topic. HBO recently picked up *Autism: The Musical* while Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*, wherein the narrator is autistic, is set for adaptation by Steven Kloves for *Harry Potter* producer David Heyman and Warner Bros.

Debut film-maker Jennifer Venditti is a casting director for feature films. She was scouting the human fauna of a high school in a rural New England town when she stumbled on 15-year-old Billy eating alone in the cafeteria.

Transfixed by his unique world-view she somehow convinced Billy and his mother to let her small crew follow him throughout his day, from breakfast, school, special education class, lunch, after school at the diner and then home for a few days one spring.

What begins as a fly-on-the-shoulder exploration of life as a teenage boy becomes a sometimes tender, oft-times painful reminder of the subtle power of both kindness and cruelty to shape a person. And it is a portrait of the strength and grace of a mother who stands by her child despite poverty and abuse.

That this is possible is entirely due to the extraordinary kid at the centre of the film. Instantly appealing to audiences for his innocence and utter lack of guile, his plain-speaking and his fondness for air guitar, Billy is unlike anyone we know: we are forced through his eyes to see the world anew.