

Maelström

2000 88m *prod* Max Films, *p* Roger Frappier, Luc Vandel, *d/sc* Denis Villeneuve, *ph* André Turpin, *ed* Richard Comeau, *pd* Sylvain Gingras, *s* Mathier Beaudin, *mus* Pierre Desrochers; *with* Marie-Josée Croze, Jean-Nicolas Verreault, Stéphanie Morgenstern, Pierre Lebeau, Klimbo.

Bibiane Champagne rids herself of an unwanted fetus on an abortion table. The narrator, an ancient fish on a chopping table, tells her story and talks about the meaning of life and its lessons. Bibiane finds herself trapped by the pain of her own existence. Daughter of a deceased fashion designer and owner of a failing clothing shop, she is in trouble with her overbearing brother and emotionally distraught by the abortion. She seeks solace as a party girl from her best friend. One rainy summer night she hits and kills a fishmonger on his way home from work. As she flees the scene, it becomes a hit-and-run. Bibiane believes the only way to get rid of the evidence, her car, is to drive it into the harbour. She vows that if she survives the fall, she can forgive herself for killing the fishmonger.

As the car falls in the water, the fishmonger's son, Evian, arrives at the morgue to collect his father's things. Their two worlds collide as Bibiane, escaping her watery grave, sets out to say goodbye to her victim. She encounters Evian, finds herself attracted to him, and the two flirt with disaster. He is unaware that she killed his father.

Marie-Josée Croze in
Denis Villeneuve's *Maelström*



After a brief ceremony to say goodbye to the dead father, the two sleep together. In the morning it is revealed that Bibiane, by delaying him with an act of love, has saved Evian from a fatal plane crash. She tells him that she is the person responsible for his father's death. Evian accepts and forgives and they move on together.

Maelström is full of thematic undertones and images of water. Splashes of ocean spray open the movie, as a fish narrates. The main character Bibiane (Marie-Josée Croze) is plagued by fish sellers and eventually kills one, making her car smell fishy. Attempting suicide by flinging herself and her car into a body of water, she survives to meet the son of the man she killed, whose name is Evian. He is a deep-sea diver. Tom Waits croons on the soundtrack about the sea not wanting him that day, and water-based images are placed throughout the film.

Croze plays the pouting, finger-sucking mid-twenties princess with silent-movie imagery. It's not her words as much as her pale looks and unemotive demeanour that gives the audience a sense of her character. More than half of the film is spent outlining Bibiane's despair over her failures. She's not the person that she's expected to be, and Croze portrays her with unspoken angst. Unfortunately, 60 minutes of Croze's blank stare as she spirals into despair is too much and some of the interest in the story is lost.

The chance meeting with Evian (Jean-Nicolas Verreault) changes the pace of the film. It should have happened earlier. Verreault shines as the anguished son and a love-starved, lonely man. The chemistry between the two works immediately, tweaking renewed interest in the story, thereby saving the picture. It becomes six degrees of separation meets a life of high-brow angst.

And then, of course, there is the fish (voiced by Pierre Lebeau) who spins the tale of woe and redemption. The story itself is dark and tragic, but humour is found in this rather disgusting portrayal of a series of ancient fish about to be slaughtered. Call it black humour, or maybe even fish wisdom, it's an attempt to make the fable less bleak. Whatever the case, the fish doesn't get in the way of story and it is a credible chorus.

Maelström is willing to be different and offbeat and is distinctly Canadian. It fits in nicely with our other art-house films that fail to capture a broad domestic audience. Yet, Villeneuve does have an original style and an immense amount of talent as a director and storyteller. *Maelström* is an assured work from a filmmaker on the path to a brilliant career in the cinematic world.

Zoë Gemelli

ABBREVIATIONS

prod—production company; **exp**—executive producer;
p—producer; **ap**—associate producer; **d**—director;
sc—screenplay; **ph**—cinematographer; **ed**—editor;
pd—production designer; **ad**—art director; **c**—costumes;
s—sound; **sr**—sound recording; **sed**—sound editing;
sfx—special effects; **mus**—music