

Seventh Row

Rebecca Daly discusses Sundance drama *Mammal*

by Alex Heeney, Editor-in-Chief | Jan 26, 2016 |



The new film from Irish writer-director Rebecca Daly, *Mammal*, is a smart, sensitive story about family, love, grief, and parenting. Rachel Griffiths stars as Margaret, a middle-aged woman who lives alone, but for a lodger. When her ex-husband (Michael McElhatton) calls her to tell her that the son that she left years ago has gone missing, it's like a bomb has been dropped into her life.

In an attempt to process the grief about the son she never knew and the guilt she feels for leaving him, she takes in a young man, Joe (Barry Keoghan), as a surrogate son. They develop a tender relationship that's always teetering between a parent-child relationship and a sexual one. Daly navigates this with great compassion, showing us two broken, vulnerable individuals who find comfort in each other, which helps them move forward.

The film is competing in the World Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival where I sat down with Daly and Keoghan to discuss the making of the film, the complex relationship between Margaret and Joe, and the animalistic nature of these characters.



Writer-director Rebecca Daly. Photo by Rich Gilligan.

Seventh Row (7R): How did you come up with the film's opening scene?

Rebecca Daly (RD): We wanted Margaret to have something that she did that was like a routine that was a refuge for her. She's very much existing rather than really living. Swimming is quite a solitary thing. You have to be determined. It's about achievement, goal setting — all these kinds of things. In the opening scene, we wanted to set up this idea of a kind of cocoon for her. Then, when the kid jumps into the water, it's like a metaphor for the film. Everything is going to be disrupted by this boy, be it her son or Joe when Joe comes along.

The film is called *Mammal*, so we wanted the audience to look at her *as* a mammal. I had this idea to shoot the opening scene like a National Geographic documentary. She's this animal moving through the water. We wanted people to think about how we are like animals, too — birth, reproduction, sex.



Rachel Griffiths and Barry Keoghan in *Mammal*. Photo by Govinda Van Maeles

7R: The relationship that forms between Margaret and Joe is a blend between a parent-child relationship and a sexual one. How did you work with the actors to navigate all of those little shifts?

RD: Margaret has a secret that she's keeping from Joe, which is that she has a son who died, and that she didn't raise him, and that's why Joe is in her house. We also wanted Joe to have a secret from Margaret, which is the other life with the gang. The both of them have that split within them and two very distinctive sides.

Working with them, we did rehearse. It was a lot of discussion more than actual rehearsal, and Barry and Rachel getting to know each other, up to a point. Rachel was quite keen that they didn't get to know each other too much, because the characters are becoming familiar with each other through the story, and we wanted to get that in the filming. But actually, I really observed Rachel being quite motherly towards you. She has that quality about her, anyway. Sometimes, she would come and fix my jacket for me. I think with you, particularly, she did have a sense of looking out for Barry.

Barry Keoghan (BK): When he's with the lads, he's a different dude. When he's with Margaret, sometimes he's trying to push buttons, and sometimes he just likes getting fed. It's the animal thing, as well, because Rebecca was keen on how he's like a fox. You can't keep him caged. He will run. The whole cat thing, with Margaret feeding the cats, it is very animal.

RD: For both of them, it does exist, at the same time, in both ways. Joe does miss his mother, does miss his home, does miss being looked after. And Margaret does all of those things. But she *isn't* his mother, so therefore, when she effects this intimacy with him, it creates this sexual response in him. It precipitates that. Also, Margaret doesn't really know how to be a mother, and especially not to somebody who's not her son. I think Joe is driving the sexual agenda more, but it's not like she's not doing her part in it either. She sort of takes a step into it, and then moves back. I think that's an interesting tension in the film between them, this back and forth, edging forward and jumping back.



Rachel Griffiths stars in *Mammal*. Photo by Govind Van Maeles.

7R: How did you think about different spaces and locations in the film? There are two very important scenes that happen in the bathtub in the bathroom. You also get these mirror images of the two characters — you see them in the shower with a similar shot, see them in the bathtub from behind. And when they run into each other in the pub, she freaks out because it's not the space that they're used to.

RD: Their relationship unfolds very much in private. Margaret would be absolutely terrified that anyone would have any inkling of what is actually unfolding between them in her everyday life. The bathtub is kind of a womb-like space. When they have sex, there's something a bit fetal about the position of their legs. It's to do with the idea of creating an essential need in the sex. It's a soothing thing rather than really sexy sex.

The shower is such a private space. Both these characters, particularly when he's in the scene in the bathroom, it's like maybe he hasn't had a wash in a while. He's a bit wild, a bit feral. And there he is in her bathroom, prowling around, using her facecloth to dry his body, using her toothbrush to brush his teeth. He's moving into a more domestic sphere.

7R: I thought the way that scene was shot was quite interesting, because before then, I only really had the sense of them having this parent-child relationship. It's the first time you get to see him alone, and the way you've shot it, there's *just enough* that you start to wonder if there's going to be something sexual.

RD: The way that I shot the film and envisioned it is that the camera is really with Margaret,, but we're really looking at Joe. We're seeing through Margaret's eyes. The idea is that the audience falls in love with Joe as Margaret does, and that's how they can understand Margaret. I think Margaret is that kind of complex character that, in some ways, needs Joe as a reflection to open her up and make her interactions more understandable. We sometimes have scenes where I wouldn't say the camera is voyeuristic in relation to Joe, but we see his body. But then, we see her body later, as well.

7R: **Can you tell me a bit about how you shot and choreographed some of the intimacy between them? A lot of it is shown in gestures, where you see a hand or an arm, or a back with a hand — just parts, instead of a whole body.**

RD: We wanted it to feel really intimate and for the camera to really capture that. Rachel and Barry really understood the scene, but there was no dialogue, so in a way, it become improvised. A lot of the time, the camera was following them, following the reactions. I wanted it to feel very intimate and textured and atmospheric, but I wanted to keep it simple and clean. We get closer to them as she's watching him and when she starts to masturbate him. We start to move in with them as we go.



Barry Keoghan in *Mammal*. Photo by Govinda Van Maeles.

7R: How did you [Barry] work on your physical performance, and the difference between the scenes with the lads and the scenes with Rachel. You really get the sense of vulnerability with her, but you can still see the cockiness when he's with his friends.

BK: When the lads were on set, I was always a bit hyper. They live around my area, and they're not actors. They're the real deal who remind me of my friends. There's Joe in all my friends. There's Joe in me. When I was with them, it was just like being with my friends. And when I went with Margaret, I knew there had to be kind of a vulnerable thing. It wasn't my environment either, so I had to play it down that [speaks quietly and deferentially] "OK, thanks for letting me stay." And as it went on, I got a bit cockier with her.

7R: How did you direct the actors in relation to the slit between the vulnerability and confidence?

RD: We talked about it a lot. Barry naturally has that about him. He can have a lot of front, and he can be very cheeky chappy. But he's really in touch with a complex emotional world, which was necessary for Joe. He and Rachel played really well off each other, not just in relation to character, but also as actors. Barry would naturally have a more lower key style than Rachel. When Rachel worked with him, you could see her become a bit more low key, as well. When she was with other actors, it would be a bit different. Sometimes, Barry would be lifted a bit by her. What existed between them was quite special.

Mammal is still seeking international distribution.