

THE FIREFLIES ARE GONE

(dir. Sébastien Pilote, 2018 – 96 mins)

It takes space to grow up – to push beyond old boundaries, make mistakes and perhaps even discover new places. But often, that space is not freely granted by the world. In Sébastien Pilote's *The Fireflies Are Gone*, Leo (short for Leonine) is a teenage girl not at a crossroads, but rather at a dead-end. There's nothing really wrong with her small Canadian town, but it can't fulfil her aimless but strong curiosity. Pilote's film – winner of the Best Canadian Feature Film award at TIFF last year – captures the simmering frustration and glimpses of hope that make up teen-hood, making his audience feel for and with Leo.

Actress Karelle Tremblay gives Leo a quiet energy underneath a facade of teen ennui. Even though Leo can't stand her family and especially not her right-wing, arrogant step-father, she doesn't close up to the world. Instead, she is acerbic and witty, always certain that she deserves better than a calm, conventional life that would keep her quiet. Early in the film, she escapes a contrived family dinner in a restaurant by going to the bathroom, then simply getting onto a bus, as though she had absolutely no other choice but to do so, the music on the score rousing to meet her excitement. Even though she doesn't know where she is going, she (and the spectator) is convinced that her place is not here.

Where Pilote excels is in highlighting all the small yet crucial gestures that a young woman like Leo, on the cusp of adulthood, begins to encounter and initiate in relationships. Always attracted by the unfamiliar, Leo one day strikes up a conversation with a regular at her local diner. Steve (Pierre-Luc Brillant) must be in his late 30s and isn't looking to meet new people or for any sort of entertainment. But he is responsive to Leo's enthusiasm, and soon the two become friends – but not by talking for hours about music, or gossiping, or even making out, like a stereotypical film would portray such a relationship between a teenage girl and an older musician. Instead, Leo and Steve walk his mother's dog together, and he teaches Leo the guitar. Their relationship evolves as a genuine collaboration, as each helps the other embrace the world, incrementally. Their mutual understanding transcends words as they get closer, organically and without any unnecessary force: a glance or a movement of the head suffice to let the other know where they stand. Leo doesn't need to go through a traumatic romantic experience with a man to learn how to listen to and protect herself.

Pilote, nevertheless, is not sugar-coating the challenges of that ungrateful age. Leo's heart has already been broken, but by her own parents, and that wound can't just be ignored. A reality that the teenage years introduce is that appearances can be deceiving, even without the supposedly safe parental cocoon. Pilote translates this discovery as a brutal awakening that, nevertheless, opens up to new beginnings. Leo not only has to learn to see the truth, but also to let it go.

– **Manuela Lasic**