

VIFF movie review: Milton's Secret zooms in on the torment of child bullying

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Young Vancouver actor William Ainscough has the lead role in Milton's Secret, a bullying drama that also stars Donald Sutherland and Michelle Rodriguez. [PNG Merlin Archive] *PHOTO BY HANDOUT*

Milton's Secret

Friday, Sept. 30, 5:30 p.m. | *Centre for the Arts*

Sunday, Oct. 9, 3:45 p.m. | *Vancouver Playhouse*

Bullying: Cast & Crew of Milton's Secret

An open session on the topic of bullying with cast members Mia Kirshner, David Sutcliffe, William Ainscough and director Barnet Bain.

Saturday, Oct.1, 1 p.m. | *Vancity Theatre*

Tickets and info: viff.org

In the 2008 book *Milton's Secret*, Vancouver-based author Eckhart Tolle and Robert Friedman investigate the world of child bullying. Specifically, in a world where the process extends into the digital realm and seemingly everyone is a spectator, how children can use mindfulness as a tool to take on such challenges in life.

Director Barnet Bain brings the story to film in a movie starring Mia Kirshner, David Sutcliffe, William Ainscough and Donald Sutherland. The thought-provoking movie manages to take something painful and all too real for many and make it entertaining and educational.

Chalk the success of the film up to the natural acting of newcomer Ainscough as 12-year-old Milton. The son of Vancouver actor Nicole Oliver (*Marrying the Family at VIFF*) delivers the internal strain of being a bullied kid facing typical middle-class family dynamics through expression more than anything. His innocence, utterly chaotic confusion and delivery of that childhood sense that everything is bigger than it is works beautifully.

Then there is the dynamic between him and his PTSD Vietnam vet-era grandfather played by the one and only Sutherland. The moment the star actor arrives on screen, he's the catalyst and completely owns the camera.

Kirshner and Sutcliffe are solid as parents challenged by the economic downturn, struggling to maintain their leveraged two luxury car, giant suburban home and top-tier wine-investing lifestyles. Naturally, this means their marriage is under great strain to the detriment of their family relationships.

Overall, the script rings true on so many levels. Kirshner is a real estate agent desperate to make a sale under asking price, so *Milton's Secret* is somewhat more difficult to relate to living in Vancouver.

Michelle Rodriguez makes an appearance as a dedicated educator trying to teach critical thinking skills to her class. A highlight of the film's realistic content is Rodriguez's constant battle to get her students to get off their mobile devices. More than a few viewers may emerge from the movie thinking that the argument for banning phones during class should be mandatory.

About the only misstep in the script is the throwback soundtrack. Donovan works fine for the scenes with Sutherland. But in a supposed chaotic world of tweens, certainly some Skrillex or Beyonce is in order.

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