



By Rex Reed

April 12, 2011 | 7:19 p.m

Fly Away is a gripping, life-enhancing low-budget little film about the physically and emotionally punishing struggles of a single mother raising an autistic child. The actors are so exemplary that it is difficult to imagine this is not a documentary. They might not be household names, but they will be. Jeanne (played by the excellent Beth Broderick) has sacrificed almost every aspect of her own life, devoting herself to her handicapped daughter, Mandy (the remarkable Ashley Rickards, from the TV show *One Tree Hill*), who is now 16 and scarcely able to brush her own teeth. Constantly suspended from her school for special needs because she's a danger to herself and the other children, she is also big enough to become a threat to her mother, sometimes shutting down completely but more often flying into howling rages that leave Jeanne covered with bruises. Trying to be a caring parent and still eke out a living working at home on a laptop, which Mandy attacks like a used toy, Jeanne is sometimes relieved of her duties by her ex-husband, Pete, who can't deal with parenting a disabled child at all, and whose visits always end in disaster. Jeanne has had so little time for herself that she hasn't felt the touch of a human hand in years. Along comes Tom (Greg Germann), a new neighbor with a rescue dog who develops a fondness for Jeanne and a special relationship with Mandy, too. Tom is too good to be true, but his attempts to bring love to Jeanne's lonely life are met with a rejection that drives him away. Well-meaning teachers and friends recommend Mandy be institutionalized, but Jeanne adamantly resists any decision that could separate her from the child she loves. The sword has a double edge.

Making an auspicious feature-film debut, triple-threat producer-writer-director Janet Grillo manages the difficult job of taking a wrenching social issue from the pages of real life and turning it into a genuinely likable, often humorous and completely absorbing movie. Still, you get the fits, the screams in the middle of the night, the staccato giggles eating tutti-fruity cereal (the only food Mandy will touch), the endless battle to balance schooling needs with the medical requirements to keep Mandy alive on a fixed income. With all good intentions, the depression is inevitable. This is no fault of the actors. As the saintly mother, Ms. Broderick is natural as breathing. Mr. Germann is winningly affable, charming and welcome as the kind and generous outsider who offers compassion without condescension. And Ms. Rickards, as the dominating, domineering child, gives a three-dimensional performance that must be experienced to be believed. The way all of these sensitive characters bond is touching and very well written, and the acting is first-rate; *Fly Away* is a glowing tribute to human survival. Unfortunately, I fear it might be too heartbreaking to generate much interest from a general audience seeking entertainment.

Eventually, life forces Jeanne to confront the problem of how to make the right choices for Mandy's future-to put her away and save both their lives, or hold on and go down the drain together. Sometimes the truest, most affirmative love one person can offer another is letting go. As admirable as it all is, *Fly Away* still seems like a Movie of the Week, or one of those "worthy" specials on Hallmark Hall of Fame, which has dealt with the same issue before. Still, this is a movie worth seeing, if for no other reason than the dramatic intensity Ms. Rickards brings to her character. In a class by herself, she deserves, at the very least, an Oscar nomination. Not since Patty Duke in *The Miracle Worker* has any actor portrayed a handicapped child (especially one with autism) with the same depth of passion and realism. Her emotional range seems to know no limits. She's more heartbreaking than the movie itself, and that is very high praise indeed.

Fly Away

Running time 80 minutes

Written and directed by Janet Grillo

Starring Beth Broderick, Ashley Rickards, Greg Germann