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'Breaking the Ice' Review: Clara Stern's Ice Hockey Drama Is A Focused But Minor Character Study [Tribeca]


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A minor but affecting character study about buried family trauma, **Clara Stern's** feature-length narrative debut **"Breaking the Ice"** works well as both a sports drama — focusing on an Austrian minor-league women's hockey team — and a romantic drama. While perhaps too contained within its protagonist's point of view, Stern's film is nevertheless an impressive debut.

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The film follows a mid-20s hockey player, Mira (**Alina Schaller**), as she goes about trying to balance her athletic career with her duties at her family's vineyard. Shy, contemplative, and something of a cipher, Mira's life is upended by the arrival of Theresa (**Judith Altenberger**) to the team. A superior player who hopes to be recruited by the NWHL, Theresa, and Mira slowly form a bond as they hang out after practices together. Complicating their budding romance is Mira's brother Paul (**Tobias Resch**), who disappeared years earlier after a tragic accident, and eventually comes back into her life. Unwilling to visit his family, he instead spends his nights playing dress-up with Mira and Theresa, inventing various personas in an attempt to escape his own past.

The bulk of Stern's film oscillates between the trio's nights out drinking and the aftermaths as Mira and Theresa's team — The Dragons — get closer to their league's playoffs. "Breaking the Ice" wisely uses and upends the tropes of sports movies to zoom in on Mira's experiences on and off the ice. Her shyness is seemingly at odds with her role as the team's captain, but she demonstrates a singular focus while playing that doesn't fully translate to her interactions with her mother (Pia Hierzegger) and dementia-ridden grandfather (Wolfgang Böck). Once Paul returns, she's forced to not only contend with the buried familial trauma that he brings along but also finally live her life without the crippling anxiety that she previously had.

The most vital aspects of the film are often focusing on Mira's uninhibited personality when she is around Theresa and Paul. The clubs and the bars that they go to allow Paul, and Mira, to adopt various identities that let her out of her shell. This even translates to her time on the team, as she slowly becomes a more outspoken captain as they get closer to the finals. A coach-bus sing-along to **Macklemore's** "Good Old Days" (yes, really) proves to be a highlight of this thread.

But the familial drama is also a bit underdeveloped. While it is slowly revealed why Paul ran away from home — and why he is so uncomfortable as himself — we never really get a sense of how their sibling dynamic existed before he left. Instead, the character is less a fully-realized person and more of a catalyst for Mira to reach some type of self-actualization. Theresa gets a more-rounded characterization, but the tension between her and Mira towards the end of the film feels like forced drama — as if Stern leaned a bit too fully into the romantic drama and sports story that she is so obviously riffing on.

Even with these stock characterizations, "Breaking the Ice" works well as a singular character study, mining enough interest out the eccentricities of the group's hangouts and the tension that comes from the Dragons' season. The hockey scenes are skillfully filmed by Johannes Hoss, as the camera glides around the rink with the characters, while the scenes outside of the rink reflect the drabness — and subsequent excitement — that mirrors Mira's point of view.

Stern's film may, perhaps, be too slight for some — a bit too invested in capturing Mira's day-to-day routines than fleshing out the supporting characters or drama. But, its singular focus is commendable and showcases a quietly powerful performance from Schaller and announces Stern as a filmmaker to watch. [B]

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