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'Maudie' tale built on artist's own escape

Gnarled and all but crippled since childhood by rheumatoid arthritis, Canadian folk artist Maud Lewis would sit by the window of the 12-by-12-foot house without plumbing she shared with her abusive handyman husband and paint from her imagination bright postcard portrayals of life in the Nova Scotia countryside: deer in the snow; churchgoers in fringe-topped surreys; cats, fluffy and startled, sitting among the pink branches of blossom-laden trees.

Lewis, who died in 1970 at age 67, was Canada's equivalent of Maine's Grandma Moses, a beloved naïf painter of cheerful primary-colored scenes who was discovered, acclaimed and mildly exploited by sophisticates who could not have possibly understood the tragedy, complexity and hardship of her life and who conflated her primitive lifestyle with primitive genius.

"Maudie," Irish director Aisling Walsh's biopic extolling Lewis' life and work, is framed as a love story between the socially and physically disabled Maud (Sally Hawkins) and her illiterate and cruelly insecure husband, Everett (Ethan Hawke).

After the death of her parents, the severely arthritic Maude, now in her early 30s, is ousted from the family home that her brother Charles (Zachary Bennett) has inherited and sold. She is deposited to live with their Aunt Ida (Gabrielle Rose) who is paid by Charles to care for her.

Ida is a sour old puss who believes paints are too messy to have in the house.

Lonely and unhappy, Maud sneaks out to a local dance hall for human contact — to drink, smoke and dance alone among flocks of indifferent rural revelers.



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel at Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rford@scharfbanks.com.

It is ominously hinted that the roadhouse was also the site of some danger in the past.

These sinful visits lead to such tension with Ida that Maud resolves to become independent. One day, at the dry goods store, a scruffy man comes in to post an advertisement for a live-in housekeeper.

Unwashed, unloved and uncouth as Everett Lewis, Ethan Hawke rises to the challenge of causing us to forget this ignorant, flailing, tempestuous man resides in the mortal form of the standard bearer of masculine beauty and affect.

Through Hawke we empathize with Everett, a virtual hermit who chafes at the impositions of the outside world and is so resistant to change that he still takes his meals at the orphanage where he was raised. Everett is terrified of anything out of his control. And everything is out of his control.

Although he has advertised for a live-in housekeeper, he resents Maud's presence and tries to extinguish any agency on her part: "Let me tell you how it is around here," he tells her, "It's me, them dogs, them chickens, then you."

When Everett slaps Maud in

front of his only friend, who has joked about their living arrangement, we realize the extent to which this charmingly upbeat film averts its gaze in order to assuage modern sensibilities.

Quiet in its tone, the film is visually sensual in its depiction of wintery, Wyeth-worthy snow-capes and stark scenes of sky, road and waves of grain.

This small vehicle hands Sally Hawkins her "Rainman" moment.

In a physical performance that is perfectly pitched, the transformed Hawkins communicates Lewis' disability without distracting from Walsh's concept of Maud as a vulnerable-yet-wily survivor, a savant who finds love in her outsider art and unevolved soulmate.

Hawke's begrimed Everett is a misunderstood misanthrope redeemed by love and art. (Whereas the real Everett, toothless and regrettable, appears to have been a mean, barnyard Stanley Kowalski.)

Lewis painted the fantasy world in her head, which was, as one CBC documentary dubbed it, "A Life Without Shadows." Her art was an escape from the hardship in her life, not a representation of its rural serenity.

It is a challenge to convey to audiences the complexity and compulsions of an artist's work.

"Maudie" provides context by focusing on the love story that runs through the movie's core, showing how Lewis' art was both nourished and battered by the relationship. This device accounts for the movie's success as a story, but it suggests a disconnect as well.

With her two beautiful stars, significantly sanded down to play simple rustic eccentrics, Walsh presents Maud's life as charmingly as her paintings.

It's a nice story. But we can handle the truth.