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Prodigal Sons -- Film Review

By Frank Scheck, February 25, 2010 05:59 ET

Bottom Line: This highly personal documentary offers a unique twist on its familiar themes.

Homegrown documentaries dealing with gender issues and family dysfunction by now are a dime a dozen, but Kimberly Reed's "Prodigal Sons" is definitely unique. Depicting the transgender woman filmmaker's return to her Montana hometown for her 20th high school reunion, the film delivers a midway narrative revelation so unexpected and bizarre that one is tempted to doubt its veracity.

(Spoiler alert: Time to stop reading if you would rather not know the film's surprise in advance.)

Reed, a former high school star quarterback who is now a strappingly beautiful woman with a loving female partner, returns home to spend time with her mother and two brothers, including the adopted Marc, with whom she has long been estranged.

Complicating her relationship with Marc is the fact that because he suffered a serious head injury in a car crash years earlier, he has been emotionally volatile, prone to wild mood swings and bouts of aggressiveness.

Although the film initially seems to be all about the filmmaker's reunion with the people in her past and their reactions to her new identity, it soon becomes largely about Marc, who, it is found out, actually is the grandson of Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth. (His resemblance to the former is indeed uncanny).

In one of the more bizarre episodes, the siblings travel to Croatia, where they have an emotion-filled meeting with Welles' former paramour, Oja Kodar. But Marc's relishing of his newfound link to fame is short-lived, as he again deteriorates into rage upon returning home, with one violent encounter resulting in an intervention by police.

Despite its undeniably fascinating elements, "Prodigal Sons" attempts to deal with so many issues at once that it inevitably lacks focus. But there's no denying that it offers a hook that other similarly themed docs could only envy. After all, it's not like the ghost of Welles hovers over every filmmaker's debut effort.

Opens: Friday, Feb. 26 (First Run Features)
Production: Big Sky Film Prods.
Director: Kimberly Reed
Producer: John Keitel, Kimberly Reed
Executive producers: Robert Hawk, Gail Silva
Director of photography: John Keitel
Editors: Shannon Kennedy, Kimberly Reed
Music: T. Griffin

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-1 of 1 Pages 1

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