



Juniper

94 min

October 23, 2023

Often used as ornamentals, the attractive juniper plant gives gin its lovely flavor. Conversely, it is quite stubborn, thriving in many environments. And its pointy, needle-like foliage can prick you if you're not careful. For purposes of a cinematic metaphor, Ruth (Charlotte Rampling) is a juniper. The key difference, of course, is that she doesn't provide the flavor for her gin – she drinks it. A lot of it. Set in rural New Zealand, this remarkably sensitive drama delves into complex family relationships as it traces a teen's coming-of-age. For such a warm, involving film, the story touches mortality from a few thoughtful angles. And as the catalyst for the plot, Charlotte Rampling is able to deliver another of her finely tuned, beautifully understated performances as a woman who has seen the world. Reeling from his mother's death, teen Sam decides to take his own life on her birthday. His distant father Robert is oblivious to his pain. Then Sam's plan is complicated by the arrival of his cantankerous British grandmother Ruth who is recovering from a badly broken leg and arrives with private nurse Sarah. When Robert heads to England to sort out the legal details, Sam is forced to take a more active role in helping Sarah. As he reluctantly gets to know Ruth, he realises what an extraordinary woman she is. Writer-director Mathew Saville keeps the tone fairly low-key, even when Sam's raucous rugby buddies descend on the house, and Ruth bribes them with alcohol and a party as they clean up the messy garden. Most of the story's real action takes place in the stories the characters tell each other, such as how Sam went off the rails after his mother's funeral, or how Robert still resents his mother for placing him in a boarding school. These elements weave together to create a layered depiction of this fragmented family, and to make each one of them sympathetic. It helps that the actors deliver sensitive performances. Even when they're doing something selfish or unthinking, they reveal the internal circumstances that help explain why. Rampling quietly holds the entire film in riveting focus as the fiercely intelligent former war photographer. Her stillness is, as usual, magical. The action widens out of the house every now and then, offering a chance to show off the beautiful landscapes and more grounded locations like Sam's school and the local hospital. But this is essentially about three people who are disconnected by events from their past, and each inadvertently finds a path back to themselves by finding common ground with the other two. It's a delicately orchestrated dance that leaves us with a knowing smile.

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