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Ping Pong Summer: Sundance Review

11:26 PM PST 1/23/2014 by Justin Lowe

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The Bottom Line

A thick slice of teenage wish-fulfillment dripping with nostalgia.

Venue

Sundance Film Festival, NEXT

Cast

Marcello Conte, Myles Massey, Helena Seabrook, Joseph McCaughtry, Andy Riddle, Emmi Shockley, Lea Thompson, John Hannah, Susan Sarandon

Director-screenwriter

Michael Tully

Susan Sarandon, Lea Thompson and John Hannah support a cast of young newcomers in this 80s-set comedy.

Michael Tully's follow-up to 2011's narratively erratic *Septien* is a coming of age comedy that's mainstream in the extreme, which could work distinctly to its advantage. Accessible, amusing and sporting a soundtrack of 80s rap and soft rock tracks, *Ping Pong Summer* stands to attract attention from period-film fans and teens perhaps more attuned to their parents' generation than their own. It's the summer of 1985 and awkward 13-year-old Radford "Rad" Miracle (**Marcello Conte**) is on his way to the Maryland shore to vacation for a couple of weeks with his parents and wiseass, proto-goth older sister Michelle (**Helena Seabrook**).

What could potentially be a bumper summer starts looking up when he meets fellow hip-hop

fan Teddy Fryy (**Myles Massey**), who introduces him to the Fun Hub amusement center, complete with arcade video games, air hockey, foosball and a ping pong table. For a table tennis enthusiast, Rad's skills have got quite a bit of room for improvement, as rudely noted by snotty rich kids Lyle Ace (**Joseph McCaughtry**) and Dale Lyons (**Andy Riddle**), who make their disdain pretty clear by kicking Rad and Teddy off the table so that they can play undisturbed. That not-so-smooth move gets the thumbs-down from Lyle's ex-girlfriend Stacy Summers (**Emmi Shockley**) and when he confronts her, Rad stupidly tries to intervene, earning himself Stacy's admiration but Lyle's ongoing resentment. The continuing rivalry for Stacy's attention and ping pong supremacy eventually drives a frustrated Rad to challenge Lyle to the ultimate playoff match, but first he'll have to bring his game up a couple of dozen notches.

However, his eccentric next-door neighbor Randi Jammer (**Susan Sarandon**) turns out to be a former table tennis star. Fortunately she's prepared to take sympathy on Rad and offer him some critical coaching before the big game and now that his crush Stacy is taking a genuine interest, Rad might actually have a shot at shaking his loser image. If the setup for Tully's jokey tribute to 80s teen comedies seems rather formulaic, it's all in good fun, although the film noticeably lacks the dimensionality of the best material of the period, sometimes playing like a throwback to after-school TV movies.

PHOTOS: The Scene at Sundance Film Festival 2014 ^[1]

In part, it's probably because the film lacks any real edge – characters with names seemingly ripped from rap tracks manage to overcome almost every challenge, often with on-the-nose dialogue that sometimes reaches cringe-worthy extremes. The young, fairly inexperienced principal castmembers mostly hold their own, although Conte comes across as rather too passive, and a larger dose of Massey's spirited performance would have brought the whole game up a bit. Sarandon could probably do the Jammer role in her sleep, pulling off the oddball single recluse character with aplomb, if not much panache. The appealingly rendered period setting allows Tully to indulge a major penchant for 80s cultural ephemera, from cassette-deck boom boxes and silly slogan-bedecked T-shirts to flashy track suits and classic junk food. His affectionate scripting of the plot and characters is confirmed by a sometimes too-gentle approach behind the camera, bypassing opportunities to sharpen the tone and action by a few more critical degrees. Cinematography that's a bit grainy and soft around the edges creates the

appropriate vintage film look to accompany the pop-driven soundtrack. Rose-tinted as the film's perspective may be, Ping Pong Summer is still a lingering, entertaining glance back at an era that Americans just can't seem to get enough of, whether in music or movies.

Venue: Sundance Film Festival, NEXT

Production companies: Nomadic Independence, Epic Match Media

Cast: Marcello Conte, Myles Massey, Helena Seabrook, Joseph McCaughtry, Andy Riddle, Emmi Shockley, Lea Thompson, John Hannah, Susan Sarandon

Director-screenwriter: Michael Tully

Producers: George M. Rush, Brooke Bernard, Ryan Zacarias, Billy Peterson, Jeffrey Allard, Michael Gottwald Executive Producers: Wally Hall, Marcus Dean Fuller and Julie Fuller, Ferris Gibson, Andrew Russo, Dominic Fortunato

Director of photography: Wyatt Garfield

Production designer: Bart Mangrum

Costume designer: Stephani Lewis

Music: Michael Montes Editor: Marc Vives

No rating, 92 minutes

Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/scene-at-sundance-film-festival-671937>