

SFIFF. *Mouth to Mouth*.

Craig Phillips on a world premiere at the **San Francisco International Film Festival**.

After *Palindromes*, just what I needed was a film about... a teenage runaway. But Alison Murray's feature debut (she's done terrific work in short filmmaking) *Mouth to Mouth*, an imperfect but striking effort, is of a wholly different universe and energy. Based on Murray's own experiences as a teenage runaway, the film depicts the troubled relationship between a mother and the teenage daughter she had too young. The girl, Sherry (played with ferocity by **Ellen Page**, who jarringly reminded me here of an ex-girlfriend, but never mind), runs away to strike out on her own in Europe and hooks up with an charismatic group of partying activists who call themselves SPARK (Street People Armed With Radical Knowledge; check out the group's faked up [website](#)). They work to get people off of hard drugs, making them part of a family, travel in a sort of "Burning Van" eventually to their own compound at a vineyard, where, well, when you put the words "compound" and "family" together, you can see where this is going, and not some place good.

Along with Page, it's **Maxwell McCabe Lokos**, as Mad Ax - and he *is* like something out of a *Mad Max* film - who makes the most striking impression. A Tasmanian Devil of a character, Lokos, who looks like Dennis Christopher with a mullet, shakes up the screen but never veers off into caricature. An early tragedy in particular shades his character as a sad case to be empathized with, as does the memorable last scene with Page.

Murray's work is admirably uncompromised, and her previous experience directing dance films filters through here in the way the action is choreographed with constant movement. For the most part, that energy and the film's edgy style speed things along well, but one integral component of the plot I had trouble getting past: the presence of the mother, Laurie (**Natasha Wightman**), who ends up joining the cult - I mean, group. I felt as annoyed as Page's character at the disruption and, unfortunately, that and some exasperating behavior on the part of some of the characters almost steers the film toward the silly. However, focusing on Sherry's slow realization of things going awry manages to sustain interest to the end. *Mouth to Mouth*, a world premiere at the SFIFF, is a messy trip, but there's a lot of spark here and signs of good things to come from Murray. Executive produced by **Atom Egoyan**, of all people.