

film

The cult of dance

Mouth to Mouth Reviewed by Jennie Punter

★★½

Written and directed by Alison Murray
Starring Ellen Page, Eric Thal,
Natasha Wightman and August Diehl
Classification: 14A

Mouth to Mouth, the feature debut of choreographer Alison Murray, recently had its Canadian premiere at the Moving Pictures Festival of Dance on Film and Video. The film has a handful of exquisite scenes in which characters suddenly break into choreographed movements — it's as if they are so overcome by emotion or the situation that words aren't enough and they need to find a deeper form of expression. But dance is even more significant to the film in terms of how it informs Murray's overall approach to storytelling.

The story is a familiar coming-of-age tale, with one intriguing twist (in the plot, not one of the dances). A young woman, Sherry, played by the wonderful Ellen Page (*Marion Bridge*) hooks up with SPARK, the nifty acronym for Street People Armed With Radical Knowledge. At first she seems like a typical recruit, a street kid looking for adventure and love, who is attracted by the family dynamic of what seems like an edgy activist group. But Sherry never becomes completely smitten with SPARK, which we gradually realize is a cult.

Her youthful cynicism kicks into gear early on when she is repulsed

by her fellow SPARKsters dumpster-diving for food; and, when one of the youngest members accidentally dies when he's tossed into a dumpster, she can't believe SPARK's leaders want to leave his body behind. But Sherry hangs in there, even after her mother Rose (Natasha Wightman) joins SPARK (that's the twist). We first meet Rose on her one-woman mission to find her missing daughter. She "rescues" Sherry, but on the drive home they argue (which turns into a dance at one point). Sherry returns to the group, only to find her mother is already there. Bummer.

SPARK's handsome and, naturally, charismatic leader, Harry (Eric Thal) and his lieutenant, Tiger (August Diehl) — both of whom either don't own shirts or want people to see their torsos — have taken SPARK to an abandoned vineyard in Portugal. This is supposed to be their refuge and paradise, but Harry soon puts them all to work and pronounces "punishments" when someone steps out of line.

The creepy transformation of Rose into a devoted cult member allows you to see what may have been driving Sherry all along — she needs to get away from her needy mother and find her own path.

Murray's dialogue is serviceable and sometimes a little clichéd, but the inventive way she uses space and moves the bodies in that space, not to mention the creative camera work, makes *Mouth to Mouth* feel fresh and alive.

Mouth to Mouth runs Nov. 11-18 at Camera Bar, 1028 Queen St. W. (416-530-0011).

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JOSIE SYKES

August Diehl and Ellen Page: storytelling meets choreography.