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"My One and Only" casts warm glow at Berlin

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By Kirk Honeycutt

BERLIN (Hollywood Reporter) - Arriving not a moment too soon, the light, effervescent "My One and Only" has brightened up Berlin Film Festival competition screenings that were threatening to drown in a sea of sorrow over war crimes, racism and dysfunctional families.

How the jury responds to this throwback to '50s-style Hollywood comedies is anybody's guess but general audiences should embrace this most amusing film. Richard Loncraine's movie is very much built for the mainstream but its wit and style probably will connect best with audiences over 25.

The film, written by Charlie Peters, is based on the childhood experiences of actor George Hamilton. When he was barely old enough to drive, he along with his slightly older half brother found themselves being dragged around the country on a husband-shopping adventure by his tenacious mother.

Only mom -- played with sparkles of feminine allure, strong-minded determination and more than a little naivete by Renee Zellweger -- hasn't taken a good look at the calendar. It's 1953, not 1938, and the boys don't snap at bait that is getting older. Indeed the only fish she attracts are loonies and losers.

This Southern belle is still a beauty. But her sons are clever and smart so they sense disappointment around every corner. The audience does too but for once predictability doesn't work against a movie. It's really not so much predictability as destiny.

Logan Lerman plays George and in a sense he's the straight man here since brother Robbie, wonderfully played by Mark Rendall, is a real character too, a "sensitive" youth interested in sharp clothes and sharper wit. No one ever uttered the word gay in 1953.

Zellweger is the force of nature at the center of the film, but Lerman holds his own. He's clearly the only adult in the family and that includes his dad - a bandleader who prefers the road and its temptations to family life - played by Kevin Bacon with a Peter Pan twinkle in his eye. So Lerman anchors the film with wry observations and a quiet determination to not let this whirlwind of a mother pull him from his own life's course.

The film is episodic as it takes off from New York, hours after Ann Devereaux catches husband Dan with another woman, and hop scotches to Boston, then on to St. Louis, Phoenix and finally L.A., more or less following the old Route 66.

The flaws in Ann's men are almost too easily spotted. An old beau (Steven Weber) is in more trouble than Ann. An army doctor (Chris Noth) suffers from, as Robbie puts it, "battle fatigue." Another old admirer prefers much younger women and a paint store owner (David Koechner) has perhaps sniffed too much paint in his life.

The one interesting exception is a young man (Nick Stahl) in Pittsburgh, living in the same building, who looks like he's modeled himself after James Dean but turns out to be a true gentleman.

Peter's lightning-fast script and Loncraine's steady direction steer this road picture to the sunny side of the street. You laugh, not worry, about this family at risk. You're not meant to wonder where what little money they do have comes from and whether Ann bothered getting a divorce before accepting so many proposals not matter how bogus.

An asbestos salesman the trio picks up, raving about his product, catches the spirit of the film: This is a look back at a comic adventure from the vantage point of time and knowing better. Asbestos turned out to be dangerous and so does the concept that this tight-knit family needs an outsider to take care of them. What they really experience is the adventure of a lifetime.

(Editing by Dean Goodman at Reuters)

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