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Sea of Dreams

A Success Films release of a Success Films production in association with Robert Katz Entertainment. Produced by Jose Bojorquez, Nickolay Todorov. Executive producers, Pedro DeKeratry, Robert Katz. Directed by Jose Bojorquez. Screenplay, Bojorquez, David Howard.

Marcelo - Johnathon Schaech
Grecia - Sendi Bar
Rina - Angelica Maria
Sebastian - Nicholas Gonzalez
Tomaso - Seymour Cassel
Nurka - Sonia Braga

By PETER DEBRUGE

Nearly two years after its Mexican release, English-language "Sea of Dreams" reaches U.S. shores like a relic of more innocent times, a polished curio amid sex- and violence-saturated features. Jose Bojorquez's marine fairytale -- about an island siren betrothed to the sea whose curse endangers any mortal who dares court her -- evokes an era of storytelling, devoid of sensationalism and irony, on which many still dote. Though good intentions don't necessarily excuse pic's more predictable elements, unjaded auds will see under-the-radar release as a rare treasure.

It isn't every day that a cast as far-reaching as this -- Israeli beauty Sendi Bar, Americans Johnathon Schaech and Seymour Cassel, Brazilian legend Sonia Braga, Mexican favorites Angelica Maria and Nicholas Gonzalez -- comes together as compatriots on the island of Hidden Port.

Young Grecia (Bar) washes ashore like Boticelli's Venus, curled up in a shell-shaped raft. Although her parents perished, Grecia's survival is viewed by the superstitious fishing community as a sign of good luck until, several years later, a village boy is taken by the sea after he attempts to steal a kiss from Grecia.

"The sea wants you for itself. Any man who loves you will die," warns the drowned boy's mother (Braga), who turns the entire community against Grecia -- all but her second son, Sebastian (Gonzalez), who harbors a secret love for her while carefully keeping his distance from the sea.

Enter the oblivious Marcelo (Schaech). Immediately smitten by the sight of grown-up, gorgeous Grecia, he puts no stock in curses, which gives him an advantage over Sebastian. As love triangles go, this scorching trio could inspire countless Harlequin

Romance covers: Buff Sebastian has no qualms about tearing off his T-shirt, casually metrosexual Marcelo expresses himself in artful photographs and Grecia pays her gratitude to the ocean by bathing in the nude (tastefully in silhouette).

At least one of Grecia's suitors will end up swimming with the fishes, though Bojorquez paints neither as the villain. The sea proves most unforgiving, even if the film resists personifying it outright.

But, for all its charms, Bojorquez's bittersweet yarn feels vaguely counterfeit: a picture of magical realism-infused quaintness engineered to pass as centuries-old local legend. Resulting three-hanky tragedy falls more in the vein of Nicholas Sparks than Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Like the brightly colored tchotchkes offered to border town tourists, pic's effervescent look and exceptional score (by "Il Postino" composer Luis Bacalov) distract from a more genuine cultural experience. Some will see that artifice as the film's greatest asset, allowing it to conform to the "Like Water for Chocolate" paradigm of what a Mexican film should be: passionate peasants unleashed in rustic locales. Fashionable modernists will dismiss it with a single eye-roll.

Sound design gets the pro treatment from Skywalker Sound, one of many indications that Bojorquez went the extra mile for project to be taken seriously. Having cast perform in English makes for a motley cacophony of accents, but theoretically widens pic's potential aud. **With:** Julio Bektor, Gaston Melo, Tina Romero, Pablo Santos, Daniela Schmidt, Jessica Valdes.

Camera (color), Christopher Chomyn; editor, Tia Nolan; music, Luis Bacalov; music supervisor, David Franco; production designer, Gloria Carrasco; set designers, Lizette Ponce, Veronica Levy; costume designer, Sergio Ruiz; sound (Dolby), Luciano Larobina; supervising sound editor, Gary Rizzo; sound designer, Kent Sparling; casting, Emily Schweber. Reviewed on DVD, Los Angeles, Sept. 19, 2007. MPAA Rating: PG. Running time: 99 MIN.

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