

Eva Riley about PERFECT 10

“The most amazing mop of curly hair!”

I passionately hate them, those boys racing their mopeds down my street in a filthy cloud of smoke and deafening noise. If a director succeeds in making me sympathise with those kids, she must have been very convincing. PERFECT 10 takes you to the gym, not a glittering sports temple but a brick building with old-fashioned metal coat hooks, where the odor of sweat-saturated plastic mats fills the room.

The life of Leigh, a 15-year-old gymnast preparing for her first competition, is thrown into chaos when her previously unknown half-brother Joe turns up. Soon Leigh finds herself caught up in an underground world of moped crime. Suddenly finding the attention she has been craving, Leigh stands at a crossroads in life. With warm understanding director Eva Riley tells about the ups and downs of teenage life.

The gym must have offered you many visual options, like in the

opening scene, with Leigh dangling upside down.

Eva Riley: We had to find the right gymnastics club so that we could construct the visuals around that. Once we found it I spent a lot of time there getting inspired by the place. I'd sit in on a class watching gymnasts do their routines. I came up with the upside down shot after seeing kids at the club dangle upside down when they were resting.

Leigh's routines somehow reflect her state of mind.

Riley: The girls I spoke to said that when you're not feeling your routine, you're like really stuck. You feel vulnerable, standing there kind of half dressed in a leotard. But when a routine went well, it felt like flying, like you're free. That is why I always planned to shoot the final gymnastics routine in a different way to the rest of the film, to give a sense of the progression of Leigh's mental state.



Why gymnastics?

Riley: At that time, for some reason, I was watching a lot of gymnastic videos, getting kind of obsessed with floor routines. I'd be sitting at my desk in tears at some of them because they're so lovely! And then there was Nadia Comăneci, who did the perfect 10 score at the Olympics in 1976. Initially I wanted to make a film about a girl who was obsessed with Nadia Comăneci, because at that time, I was.

Is Leigh's incapability to communicate with others an obstacle in her performance?

Riley: At this moment in her life it is a big obstacle. She hasn't always been

so bad but she is having a difficult time. Her dad is not good at communicating and I think she got it from him. It definitely seeps into her life as a gymnast, as it's really important to express your emotions when performing a floor routine.

Her coach Gemma (Sharlene Whyte) knows how to handle her. More than focussing on scores, she finds the right tone to speak with Leigh.

Riley: I have watched a lot of sports films with these terrible, clichéd portrayals of coaches, and I wanted to get away from that. I have spoken to lots of coaches and found them really fascinating, often acting as half

coach, half therapist. It can be a tricky balance. We saw how coaches were really strict but also really loving with the girls. Gymnasts in general look up to their coaches so it can be a close relationship and Gemma will have known Leigh for many years and got to know how she works. Sharlene, who plays Gemma, actually used to be a gymnast, which I didn't realise.

Can girls like Leigh only stand strong by acting tough and being snappy?

Riley: Every girl will find her own way to get by in this world. I think this is the way that Leigh finds easiest at the moment. It's easier to snap back at someone sometimes than let you guard down.

Through Leigh's bond with Joe, we see in every little detail how her self-confidence grows. How did you get Frankie Box to build up this feeling so gradually?

Riley: We workshoped her character a lot. Frankie is an amazing young actress and understood very well what I was looking for. She also had a great acting chemistry with Alfie. Through improvisation I was able to create these small spontaneous moments that reflect her changing state.



The physical tension between Leigh and Joe isn't an obvious element to the story, although you handle it with great elegance and discretion.

Riley: As I worked on the script I thought it was an interesting angle to take on the story. I wanted to make sure that it didn't feel gratuitous or off-putting to an audience. I wanted to make it feel understandable that she might have these confused feelings in this new friendship. If you're very lonely, someone giving you a bit of love and care, even in a weird way, it doesn't really matter. That is what it's like to be young and confused. I just wanted to see the impact it has, and try and make it relatable even

though it's obviously a strange thing to do.

Leigh leaves the question "Was your mum a bit alright?" unanswered.

Riley: Leigh's mum has died and she finds it really hard to talk about it. She has a lot of weight on her shoulders and finds it really painful when she is asked about her mum like that. I was really pleased with how that moment came out.

Excuse me for this urgent question but... Is her hair real?!

Riley: Yes! Frankie has the most amazing hair and our makeup artist did a brilliant job bringing the best out in

it. It's really important to have a visual identity with your main character, and her big mop of curly hair and blue leotard add to that. Together with costume designer Suzie Coulthard we looked a lot at leotards. Colour is a really important thing to me. I want something that's poppy, and that really springs out of the screen.

What a 'healthy' ending you came up with! I couldn't think of a more empowering ending to this story.

Riley: At one point, I was trying to make it a classic sports film, which had a competition scene at the end. But it's not a competition film, it's a film about these two kids, and I always wanted a powerful and emotional ending which brought Joe and Leigh back together. Many people suggested a sad ending but I knew from the very beginning that the ending should be happy or at least bittersweet. I wanted to give a sense of hope and joy and celebration for these two amazing young people.

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Gert Hermans
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