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My Year Without Sex

(Australia) A Footprint Films release of a Screen Australia, Hibiscus Films production, in association with Film Victoria, South Australian Film Corp., Adelaide Film Festival, Showtime Australia. (International sales: the Works, London.) Produced by Bridget Ikin. Executive producers, John Maynard, Andrew Myer, Joanna Baeviski, Andrew Barlow, Paul Wiegard. Directed, written by Sarah Watt.

With: Sacha Horler, Matt Day, Maude Davey, Katie Wall, Fred Whitlock, Sonya Soares, Portia Bradley, Jonathan Segat, Petru Gheorgiu, Eddie Baroo, Travis Cotton.

By [RICHARD KUIPERS](#)

A middle-class Melbourne mom recovering from a near-fatal illness wrestles with the titular problem and a whole lot more in the spry existential dramedy "My Year Without Sex." Anchored by Sacha Horler's spot-on lead perf, the pic seamlessly blends morbidly funny snapshots of life's small moments with affecting commentary on the big questions. Winning sophomore outing by former Aussie toonster Sarah Watt will be warmly welcomed on local release May 28 by auds who flocked to her similarly themed debut hit, "Look Both Ways." Lengthy fest mileage is indicated and offshore arthouse invitations should be forthcoming.

In the middle of a Pap smear, happily married thirtysomething Natalie (Horler) collapses with a brain aneurysm but manages to survive. She emerges from surgery with half her head shaved, impaired motor skills that'll take time to recover and doctor's orders to abstain from sex for a while.

Setup is ripe for melodrama, but none ever shows during Natalie's convalescence at home with husband Ross (Matt Day), an amiable audio engineer, and their lovable offspring, Louis (Jonathan Segat) and Ruby (Portia Bradley). It's typical of helmer Watt's jaunty screenplay to have Ross tenderly caring for his wife at the same time that Ruby scores big laughs by studying the huge scar on Natalie's scalp and asking if she can bring her to school "for show-and-tell."

Taken to a community singing group by best pal Winona (Katie Wall), Natalie befriends Margaret (Maude Davey), an '80s rock 'n' roll casualty who found God and became a curate. Even non-believers will likely warm to this sweet survivor who helps Natalie approach the many meaning-of-life issues arising from her brush with death.

With months rolling by and no resumption in bedroom action (despite a greenlight from doctors), the pic's title

comes sharply into focus. The elephant in the room is handled in painfully truthful fashion as Ross awkwardly flirts with co-worker Rosie (Sonya Suarez), and Natalie gets pragmatic advice from Winona, who's married to twice-divorced older guy Greg (Fred Whitlock). Watt's gift for giving wise and witty voice to fears so often left unspoken is at its best as the issue simmers beneath the everyday activities of trouble-prone family holidays, birthday parties and financial worries over Christmas.

Performances are uniformly tops. Horler doesn't put a foot wrong as the woman forced to take stock of just about everything, and Day nails the male angle as a nice guy straining under the pressure of added responsibilities and his own insecurities.

Graeme Wood's lensing is clean and appropriately unfussy, and skillful editing by Denise Haratzis ("Look Both Ways") maximizes comic impact without compromising the serious messages. Working just fine without an original score, the pic uses a handful of well-positioned pop songs and a lovely final sing-along to good effect. Other tech work is on the money.

Camera (color), Graeme Wood; editor, Denise Haratzis; production designer, Simon McCutcheon; costume designer, Kitty Stuckey; sound (Dolby Digital), John Wilkinson; associate producer, Barbara Masel; assistant director, Chris Odgers; casting, Jane Norris. Reviewed at Fox screening room, Sydney, Feb. 24, 2009. (Also in Adelaide Film Festival -- opener.) Running time: 96 MIN.

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