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Claire

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A Put Down the Plow Moving Pictures presentation. Produced, directed, written, edited by **Milford Thomas**.

With: Toniet Gallego, Mish P. DeLight, James Ferguson, Anna May Hirsch, Allen Jeffrey Rein, Katherine Moore.

By **DENNIS HARVEY**

An
enchanti
ng
curiosity,
**Milford
Thomas'**
debut
effort
"Claire"
turns the
cinematic
clock
back to
circa
1920,
making



Domestic partners Joshua (Mish P. DeLight), left, and Walt (James Ferguson) discover the unearthly title character (Toniet Gallego), center, in their barn in 'Claire.'

use of an actual antique hand-cranked 35mm camera to perfect its mimicry of silent film style. More than just a technical novelty, however, B&W featurette based (very loosely) on a traditional Japanese fairy tale reps an utterly charming, even poignant viewing experience likely to win over auds wherever it's played. Life beyond the fest circuit is an open question, given project's unique nature and short running time. But if packaged with an appropriate short, "Claire" should at least get as far as Guy Maddin's features and Peter Jackson's hour-long prank "Forgotten Silver," to name a few likeminded past delves into cineaste esoterica.

Enigmatic sliver of a narrative has grizzled old farmers -- and unapologetically presented domestic partners -- Joshua (Mish P. DeLight) and Walt (James Ferguson) longing for a child in the 1920s rural South. One night they discover a tiny being "born" from a cornhusk in their barn. The next morning, that sprite has grown into full-size, silver-haired, saucer-eyed young woman Claire (Toniet Gallego).

The couple is delighted with this new "baby," finding to their further surprise that she cries luminescent tears and can fluently read from any foreign-language text put before her. Latter ability excites local busybody Miss Earwood (Anna May Hirsch), who insists that Claire travel abroad for a first-class education.

Claire has no desire to leave her adoring papas, however. Nor does she seem more than vaguely irked by the besotted romantic attentions paid by Miss Earwood's son Richard (Allen Jeffrey Rein). When he foolishly dives into a shallow lake from a high cliff to impress her, Claire reveals the full extent of her supernatural powers. Alas, those gifts also portend the briefness of her visit to Earth -- a goddess of the moon, she must eventually return "home."

It's a testament to director-scenarist **Thomas'** delicacy of touch that this fanciful tale emerges with as a radiantly universal, bittersweet myth rather than a mere exercise in campy nostalgia. Perfs neatly adopt the gestural vocabulary of early cinema without pushing it toward parody.

Exterior sequences have a lovely quality reminiscent of such antique pastoral classics as "Tol'able David," while interiors re-create the theatrical air of pre-1920 U.S. moviemaking. Fantasy sequences (especially a delightful dream/nightmare involving moon maidens dancing on lily pads) faithfully revisit naive "magical" f/x dating as far back as Melies.

Complete with occasional frame-per-minute speedup and flickering images, Jonathan Mellinger's lensing further makes "Claire" remarkably easy to mistake for an actual forgotten silent-era nugget. Of course, nothing from the archives would feature a gay couple or multicultural casting. That those elements are integrated as smoothly as all others adds to pic's disarming sense of large-spirited sentimentality.

Suitably wistful chamber-orchestral score by Anne Richardson was played live by composer and ensemble at the San Francisco Gay Fest premiere.

Camera (B&W), Jonathan Mellinger; music, Anne Richardson; production designer, Bentley Wood; set designer, Michael Brewer; costume designer, Tod Roberts; choreography, Miriam Arensburg. Reviewed at San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, June 26, 2002. Running time: 57 MIN.