

CODA: The film's concerns go beyond deafness

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Siân Heder

CODA, written and directed by Siân Heder, is an adaptation of the 2014 French film *The Bélier Family (La Famille Bélier)*. It concerns a working class family in Gloucester, Massachusetts, three of whom are deaf. CODA stands for Children of Deaf Adults. A “coda” can also be the concluding, summarizing part of a musical piece or a literary work.

The film premiered virtually at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival, winning four awards, including the festival's US Grand Jury Prize and Best Director in the US Dramatic section for Heder. It also set a festival acquisition record, selling to Apple for \$25 million. Troy Kotsur, 53, who plays the family patriarch in *CODA*, has been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, making him the first male deaf actor to receive such a nomination. Marlee Matlin, also in *CODA*, was the first deaf person not only to be nominated but to win an Oscar, for *Children of a Lesser God* (Randa Haines, 1986).

CODA is a refreshing film for its marked humanity and its concern not only for the tribulations of the deaf, but also for a hard-pressed, exploited fishing community. Its unique focus and concerns lift the work above the danger of becoming formulaic.

The film opens on a rusty, fishing trawler in the waters of Cape Ann, off the coast of Gloucester. Seventeen-year-old Ruby (Emilia Jones), in fishing Grundens (orange, rubberized sea-wear) belts out an Etta James tune playing on a small radio. She, her bearded, weather-beaten father Frank (Kotsur) and older brother Leo (Daniel Durant) are sorting out an impressive haul of fish on deck. Ruby is the only hearing person in the Rossi family, which includes Frank, his wife Jackie (Matlin), as brassy and argumentative as her husband, and Leo.

Eking out a living from the sea becomes increasingly difficult as the big processors cut into the fishermen's profits. Additionally, the federal government is insisting on “at sea monitors” which will cost \$800 a day. A high-school senior, Ruby starts her day at 3am and must both work as a deck hand on the Rossi boat, as well as a translator-interpreter for the family business. School time becomes an opportunity for sleep.

Sign language between family members is highly dynamic. Despite the lack of verbal communication, noise levels in the household often prove ear-numbing, and occasionally embarrassing, for Ruby.

The teen signs up for choir taught by the emotive music teacher Bernardo “Mr. V” Villalobos (the flamboyant, caustic Eugenio Derbez), who recognizes Ruby's talent and pairs her with her secret crush, Miles (Irish-born Ferdia Walsh-Peelo), for the 1968 Marvin Gaye-Tammi Terrell duet, “You're All I Need to Get By.”

Arresting vistas of the ocean are juxtaposed with images of boarded-up buildings. In one sequence, the Fisheries Council addresses a crowd of fisherman who are yet again being squeezed. Frank explodes and yells (via Ruby): “We're tired of this shit ... You don't care if these guys regulate us to death, 'cause you're the only one making money here! No one's getting paid what their catch is worth.” He proposes the Fresh Catch Program of direct selling without the middle man. But when Frank and Leo are out fishing one day without Ruby, they fail to hear a Coast Guard signal and are penalized \$2,500. Eventually, the strapped fishing community members take matters into their own hands.

Meanwhile, Ruby is encouraged to apply for Berklee College of Music in Boston. Her admittance is secured when, overcoming her initial stage fright, she fluidly

interprets the lyrics with her hands as she sings to her family who have snuck into balcony seats. In a deeply affecting scene between father and daughter, as the script describes it, “Frank lays his hand on her throat to feel the vibrations. ... Frank moves his hands around on her neck to find her voice. He closes his eyes—that’s it. He can feel it. He moves his hand to her plexus, ‘listening.’”

Director Heder explained in an interview with *Decider*: “I don’t think I fully registered that I would never hear these words, I would be seeing them. To watch this visual expression of your ideas or emotion come to life was the most exciting process.”

She noted there was resistance from the financiers: “The people in charge of the money wanted big stars and felt casting lesser-known Deaf actors would be too great a risk. Then Marlee Matlin ... an undeniable star in her own right ... joined the cast and threatened to quit the production if hearing actors were hired for the deaf roles ... It was so undeniable once we started auditioning people, how much talent there was in the Deaf community.” One can sympathize, given the limited number of opportunities, although the notion that only deaf actors can play deaf roles would set a dangerous precedent.

“The music is such an important part of the film,” asserted Heder in an interview with *sagindie.com*. “Obviously, the title has a double meaning in that a ‘CODA’ is a child of deaf adults, but a ‘coda’ also signifies the end of a piece of music. I knew that music was going to be a very important part of the story also in how it would play against the silence. Rhythmically in the film, there’s a lot of interplay between these silent ASL scenes and these choir scenes where the kids are performing these really fun choir numbers.

“But actually, the more that I studied ASL [American Sign Language] and dug into Deaf culture and being inside of ASL conversations,” she continued, “there’s so much in ASL that is musical in a way that English or any spoken language is not. ASL is very rhythmic and melodic and emotionally expressive in a way that the spoken word can’t be, but music is.” Heder added that so much of the film was in ASL, “so much of the culture on set became about ASL, and it actually felt like the language of ASL and the language of music had all these incredible parallels that were unlocked within the story. It felt like it really highlighted

thematically what the story was about.”

Heder’s enthusiasm finds artistic expression in her unabashedly sincere film. Marius De Vries’ score is understated, while Paula Huidobro’s skillful cinematography helps deepen the film’s ambiance. Bright orange Grundens dot harsh waters that reluctantly give up their bounty.

Made a year before the onset of the pandemic, *CODA* provides insight into deafness. Being hearing impaired is not viewed as an insuperable disability, but as a challenge to an individual to gain his or her bearings in the world in a particular, complex fashion, with likely its own distinct rewards.



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