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'STILL BREATHING' DOES IT BETTER

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Sometimes a movie possesses such a quiet beauty that it genuinely casts a spell on you while you're watching.

``**Still Breathing**," the debut of writer-director Jim Robinson, is such a film, a romantic comedy that stands the genre on its ear. It's a movie filled not with jokey concepts or inane banter but with grace and charm and two wonderful performances from leads Brendan **Fraser** and Joanna Going. To call it a great date movie would limit its accomplishment. It's a great movie, period.

``**Still Breathing**" follows Fletcher McBracken (**Fraser**), a San Antonio street musician who has inherited a unique family trait. His grandfather and father both had visions of the women they were to marry and then went out and found them. Fletcher waits for his moment, too, cutting out and piecing together eyes and noses and faces from various magazine photos, trying to come up with a composite of his future bride.

Then one night while sleeping on the piano (it helps make the visions clearer), Fletcher sees her - The One - in a dream, and what he sees isn't good. She's being mugged by a guy with a gun. He also visualizes the word ``Formosa," a clue to his love's location.

The woman Fletcher sees in his dream seems an unlikely match. Roz Willoughby (Going), a cynical L.A. con artist, has been burned by love so often that she's decided to make a living out of cheating would-be suitors. She and gal pal Elaine (Ann Magnuson) scam insincere lotharios by leading them on and then making them buy worthless art to prove their intentions. They split the money; the guys get the bum's rush.

Fletcher comes to Los Angeles to catch an international flight to the island

of Formosa, believing that is where he'll find Ms. Right. While he's waiting for his plane, he notices a woman paging through a tourism brochure that includes a picture of the famous Formosa Cafe in Hollywood. Fletcher puts two and two together and drives to the restaurant to meet Roz. She's there, all right, only she has come to the Formosa on a tip that there's a rich Texan coming into town who will be an easy mark. Boy, has she got the wrong man.

It's a quirky premise and could have gone awfully wrong if writer-director Robinson wasn't completely in tune with the material. Elements like Fletcher's rock sculpture hobby or his grandmother playing Chopin on the tuba or the repeated dream sequences that lead the two lovers to each other seem rather precious on paper.

But Robinson has the perfect touch with the material, using Chopin's haunting ``Berceuse" (Opus 57) in several sections of the score to create an aural beauty that nicely compliments some of the breathtaking images that he puts on the screen. The movie somehow captures the essence of stillness in a way that envelops and interests the audience. It's a stellar accomplishment, this quiet, rapturous beauty, because so few films can manage to be both absorbing and radiant at the same time.

Fraser gives a wonderfully modulated performance, conveying both Fletcher's oddball quirks and down-to-earth strengths. Going had an even more challenging task, taking Roz's apathy toward life and love and bringing her to a place where she feels open again to life's possibilities. Going communicates all this and more, faltering only slightly in believability during the con-game scenes.

But that's a small quibble for a film that manages the neat trick of being eclectic, interesting, romantic and moving. Anyone looking for an antidote to ``Godzilla" or the often overblown romanticism of ``The Horse Whisperer" would do well to see ``**Still Breathing**." It's one of the gems of the screen year.

THE FACTS

The film: ``**Still Breathing**" (PG-13; sensuality and a scene of violence).

The stars: Brendan **Fraser** and Joanna Going.

Behind the scenes: Written and directed by James Robinson. Released by October Films.

Running time: One hour, 50 minutes.

Playing: United Artists Westwood; Cineplex Odeon Showcase, Hollywood.

Our rating: Three and One Half Stars.

Caption: Photo: In ``**Still Breathing**," Roz Willoughby (Joanna Going) meets Fletcher McBracken (Brendan **Fraser**) after he sees her in a dream and books a trip to the island of Formosa with a connection in Los Angeles.

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REVIEW

STILL BREATHING

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