

Punching below their weight

RAY CONLOGUE

Punch

Written and directed by Guy Bennett
Starring Michael Riley, Sonja Bennett

Classification: AA

Rating: ★★

This is one of those Canadian movies where everything is overdrawn and everybody is helpless. Teenagers abuse parents and the parents slink away. People are paralyzed by their pasts, but have cute quirks. Rounders and bar bums appear in the hopeful belief their presence will liven things up.

Sam Frizzell (Michael Riley) is a doctor raising his troubled daughter Ariel alone. When he starts to date Mary, Ariel feels threatened and tries to sabotage things. This is a good premise, but written and acted in a fashion that rings false.

Ariel (Sonja Bennett) insults Mary's cooking and ridicules her job in a photo shop with a persistence that seems unreal. Events veer toward the preposterous when she summons her father to her bedside on the pretense of a cancerous lump in her breast. Though he has always been an irreproachable dad, she has apparently decided to seduce him. Perhaps this is how middle-class girls deep-six their dad's new girlfriend on the planet Pluto.

Ariel is a deeply angry young woman, for reasons that are not explained until far too late in the story. In the meantime, she practises boxing, beats up her girlfriends, and propositions a boy by sprawling naked on a bed and ordering him to "dig in."

She eventually slugs Mary, and this is where we learn that Mary's sister Julie is a topless female

boxer. Julie is soon threatening Sam and Ariel, and the film's driving narrative question becomes: When will Julie and Ariel bash each other into Brylcreem? The various confrontations are overwrought and not quite believable.

The film improves modestly in the second half, when Julie develops some compassion for Ariel on learning that her mother committed suicide some years earlier. The world of topless women's boxing takes on a bit of credibility when the poor self-esteem of a couple of overweight contenders is sympathetically dramatized. Mary, 33, and Sam, 45, finally start behaving like adults.

But by this time it's too late for *Punch* to turn into a good movie, despite fine acting from most of the cast. Marcia Laskowski has a nice hangdog dignity in the role of Mary. Sonja Bennett is a spunky actress; Meredith McGeachie isn't bad as Julie, either. Michael Riley, however, seems to sleepwalk through the role of Sam in a way that is surprising for such a resourceful actor.

In the end, though, *Punch's* biggest problem is that it relies on the novelty value of women hitting each other. This has a certain trendy "empowerment" cachet, but it's not going to mean much in the long run. The fisticuffs really mask the film's lack of confidence in its underlying story, a story that deserved a better treatment.

Bennett has emphasized that *Punch* was inspired by difficulties he had with his own daughter. Within the assumptions of *auteur* filmmaking, this means the director must write the script. In the real world, the opposite is the case. Bennett is too close to the story, and doesn't have much sense of how to write dramatic dialogue. Note to young directors: Dial "S" for screenwriter.

