

Film Review - *Freeheld***Directed by Peter Sollett****Starring Julianne Moore & Ellen Page****2015****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v3i1.72>**

As a citizen of Ocean County - I was born, raised, and now own a home here - there is an uneasy feeling when viewing a movie that shows how the leaders of Ocean County wanted to interdict basic human rights to its residents. While there was that part of me that got excited when I heard my hometown mentioned, I was repulsed by the fact that the events of *Freeheld* took place this century. It was the same reaction young students have when they see pictures of the Dust Bowl and can't conceive that it was a mere 70 years ago. Similarly, I can't conceive it was 11 years ago that 23-year veteran police officer Laurel Hester was denied the right to turn over her pension to her domestic partner when she passed away from lung cancer. But it's true.

The story of Laurel Hester and Stacie Andree is a heart-wrenching tale of true love and devotion. Unfortunately, Peter Sollett is unable to turn these humans into anything more than the generic caricatures that one expects of a Lifetime Television Movie. And the underdeveloped screenplay by Ron Nyswaner was of no help. Nyswaner's most famous screenplay that attacked societal norms was *Philadelphia*, turning Tom Hanks from the star of *Big* and *Turner & Hooch* into the Academy Award-winning actor that would become Forrest Gump. Perhaps Mr. Nyswaner and Mr. Sollett set out to make this the next *Philadelphia*, but they missed the mark.

The poor direction and writing are made even clearer by the performances of some of Hollywood's finest actors, who also set out to make something special, but without the guidance of a strong director, look very out of place. This is especially true for Ellen Page as Hester's domestic partner who is 19 years younger than Hester and spends their partnership as Hester's caretaker more than lover and partner. Page's character should have been our center. We should

be rooting for her just as much, if not more than Hester, because it is she who has the strength to fight, to raise her voice, and to live in victory. Unfortunately, Ms. Page's talents are not used for any of this. In fact, it is more Michael Shannon, who plays Detective Dane Wells, Hester's partner on the force, that acts as the moral voice in the film, though his short journey from quiet straight Anglo-Saxon man to advocate for homosexual rights is rushed and uninteresting. It also doesn't help that he is overshadowed by the approximate 20 minutes of screentime of Steve Carrell as actual homosexual activist Steven Goldstein. Mr. Carrell is perhaps the only triumphant performance in this film, as he straddles the fence between real and stereotypical.

The hardest pill to swallow is that of Ms. Moore's performance, which lacked any intensity and was simply a replica of previous roles, such as *Wit* and *Stepmom*, which both get a tear out the audience's eye, but without resorting to pure manipulation. Ms. Moore can usually get passed cliché, even with the worst of scripts. Perhaps she, and her fellow castmates, assumed a strong script, since it was based on a fantastic and poignant documentary by the same name. But this film is a far cry from the 2008 Academy Award-Winner for Best Documentary Short.

No viewer wants to dislike this movie, because its intentions are very good. Like the many scars in American History, this story is one that needs to be shared with the future. Unfortunately, the clunky script and poor direction make it a story that the audience has already seen a million times before. In truth, cases like Laurel Hester's paved the way to many progressive movements such as the Supreme Court ruling making gay marriage legal throughout the entire country. This film version, however, will not influence anyone's thoughts and will be forgotten by most audiences five minutes after viewing. Any interested parties would be better off taking 40 minutes to view the gripping documentary masterfully directed by Cynthia Wade, who probably should have guided this feature as well.

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