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Look both ways

Reviewer Tom Ryan

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Look Both Ways

(M, 102 minutes)

On general release from Thursday

"Look both ways" is a familiar warning, a rule that most of us first encountered during childhood, reminding us of the dangers waiting in ambush whenever we venture into the world.

Several of writer-director Sarah Watt's animated shorts (most notably *Small Treasures* and *Living with Happiness*) revolve around protagonists who are at risk of allowing these everyday dangers to become an obsession. To this group of budding neurotics we can now add Meryl (Justine Clarke), one of the central characters in Watt's wonderful first feature.

An artist, she first appears as a passenger aboard a suburban train in Adelaide, worrying about the appalling risk she's taken by being there, Watt's animated inserts effectively bringing her interior world to life. That her fears are not entirely unfounded is already clear. The opening of *Look Both Ways* revolves around a breaking news story about a rail disaster that appears to have claimed many lives. And, at least at this point, it's also possible that the film has moved into flashback and Meryl is aboard the doomed train.

Death and danger lurk everywhere in Watt's film. In the next sequence, Nick (William McInnes, Watt's husband), a photojournalist for *The Southern Mail*, learns he has testicular cancer. The diagnosis, combined with the reluctance of the pathologist to discuss the findings, leads him to fear the worst. It's a Friday and he faces a nightmare wait over the weekend before his doctor can see him, Watt inserting a rush of photos that suggest his past flashing before his eyes.

It's not just Meryl and Nick, though: a sense of foreboding hovers over all the characters in the film. Nick's friend Andy (Anthony Hayes), a columnist at *The Southern Mail*, is running a campaign about so-called "accidents" that are actually suicides, his stories revealing as much about the way he sees the world as they do about his ostensible subject.

After he and Nick are assigned to report on an accident in which a man has died trying to save his dog from being hit by a train, he uses the incident to further his campaign, despite eyewitness testimony to the contrary. Meryl, who'd been walking home after getting off the train (she'd been to her father's funeral), had seen what happened.

This is another of those films (like *Crash*) in which the fates of a group of characters are wound together around a single incident, and Watt makes the trains a constant reminder of the risks they all face every day. In addition to their centrality to the plot, they're a recurrent presence in the images, haunting the characters everywhere they go. And if it's not the trains themselves, then it's the tracks, which also serve as an especially evocative motif in a tale about the paths people follow towards and

away from each other.

With masterly control, Watt tracks those paths in ways that enable hope to emerge from the encroaching nightmares. She makes the film's brilliant title work as a pun, referring not only to the everyday dangers facing the characters but as a declaration of the need to look beyond a one-dimensional view of the world. If one can't see beyond them, the terrors will triumph; the survivors will be those who can recognise the treasures, large and small.

Look Both Ways presents lots of them. Like Andy's girlfriend (Lisa Flanagan) walking through sprinklers in a park, luxuriating in the feel of the water on her skin. Like the couple waking to the sounds of the morning birds. Or sharing the glorious kiss with which the film ends. As Nick's mother (Maggie Dence) tells him, "Everybody has to find their own way of death . . . and life."

back story

In the past, Sarah Watt's protagonists have primarily been animated ones. Aside from those she's employed to provide the voices for the characters in her shorts - like Rachel Griffiths (superb as the mother in *Small Treasures*), Sigrid Thornton, Julie Nihill and Leon Teague - her work with actors has been limited to *Derwent Envy* (1998, screened at the recent Melbourne International Film Festival), a 15-minute mix of live action and animation about a pair of twins looking back at the break-up of their parents' marriage and worrying about "accidents". For *Look Both Ways*, she's assembled a strong ensemble cast, and there's no indication of any problems in the shift from the animated figures over which she exerts complete control to the live ones who have minds of their own. She explained on a recent episode of *Australian Story* that she specifically wrote the role of Nick for her husband, William McInnes (*Blue Heelers*, *SeaChange*, *Dirty Deeds*, *You and Your Stupid Mate*), and he's responded with the performance of his career. Alongside him, Justine Clarke (*Japanese Story*, *Danny Deckchair*, a *Play School* regular) is positively luminous as Meryl, an artist who appears to be another of the semi-autobiographical protagonists populating Watt's work. As the director says: "When I go to see films or look at paintings, I want to be moved and that usually comes from something personal in the artist. So that's why I raid my own life a bit to make films."

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