

'David's Mother' is not just a disease-of-the-week film

By Ted Kasio

Too many television movies deal with diseases or illnesses. And since they never seem to go beyond melodrama or pity, there's no real reason to watch a new one.

Or is there?

"David's Mother," which airs Sunday, March 6, on CBS, breaks free of the dull mold. Granted, it features a single mother struggling to raise her autistic son, but it's not the same old thing.

"It was written pretty well," explains Michael Goorjian, who plays the autistic David at age 17. "It wasn't a disease-of-the-week story."

Instead of centering on the tragedy of autism, or the difficulties surrounding the upbringing of an autistic child, "David's Mother" is more subtle. It's about a woman who is struggling with more basic aspects of life, and an autistic son is part of her life. The story is then realized with believable portrayals of complex characters by a terrific cast.

Kirstie Alley stars as Sally Goodson, a witty and charismatic yet troubled woman who devotes all of her time and energy to raising her autistic son, David. Steve Ivany, who is autistic, portrays the young David, along with Goorjian.

But Sally's unconditional commitment to David leads to divorce and alienates her daughter. Her sister, played by Stockard Channing, offers support, but a social worker (Phylicia Rashad) awakens concern that David may need more than just his mother's love. Sally's new romantic relationship with a successful salesman (Sam Waterston) strengthens those concerns.

Alley, Channing and Waterston all shine in the foreground of "David's Mother," but it's Goorjian's portrayal of David that truly breathes life into the film. Part of this should be attributed to his understanding of autism.

"With autistics it's not kind of a general thing," Goorjian says. "Each individual has their specific

things that they do, and routines."

Because of this, Goorjian made sure he would portray David as an individual, not just a person with autism.

"For the most part it was just imagination," he says. "I did a lot of research."

His research included observing autistic people at schools in Los Angeles and Toronto, where "David's Mother" was filmed. He also worked closely with Andrea Rifkin, who was technical consultant for the film. Rifkin works with autistic children in Toronto and is a pioneer in the development of alternative communication techniques for people with autism.

To further flesh out his research and the technical aspects of autism, Goorjian applied some first-hand experience.

"I grew up near a kid who was autistic; a lot of what I did was based on my memories of him."

During filming Goorjian immersed himself in the part.

"I would get reading in the morning and then pretty much stay in character most of the day. I think to give justice to the part it kind of required that. I think it would be tremendously difficult to do that, and then go in and out of character all day long."

His method was taxing, and it did put a bit of distance between him and his co-stars, but it was also beneficial.

"I think I gained something more, as opposed to going crazy. To be able to spend all that time focusing on something else normally you don't focus on, to try to be completely detached to everything, opposed to constantly being connected to what's going on, there's a lot of things that I noticed, a lot of things that you don't normally look at. I was fortunate enough to be in a situation where I was sort of forced to focus in on those things."

Goorjian's effort and dedication to his role pays off with a wonderful performance in a film that manages to avoid clichés.

And by skipping the manipulative desire to generate pity, "David's Mother" may actually create some understanding for people with autism. Perhaps it will even help viewers realize their humanity.

Local Access on page 6

Counter Tops Reglazed

BATHTUBS • TILE • SINKS

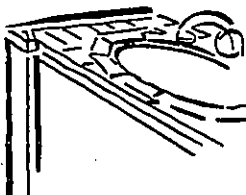
\$89.95

Standard
Bathroom
Counter Top

Written 5 Year Warranty

SALE
70%
OFF
REGULAR

Residential
Commercial
&
INSURED!



427-3838