



“The Sea Inside”

[by Teresa Talerico]

Powerful, touching, and ultimately uplifting despite its grim subject matter, “The Sea Inside” explores a quadriplegic’s fight to die with dignity, his uphill legal battles over the issue, and the people whose lives he touches.

The movie is based on the true story of Ramón Sampedro, a former ship mechanic from Spain who was paralyzed from the neck down after a diving accident at age 26. For nearly 30 years he fought for the right to assisted suicide.

As a man committed to orchestrating his own death, Ramón (Javier Bardem) hardly seems bitter, angry, or morose. Rather, he exhibits spirit, compassion, and a playful wit. He delights in flirting with the various women in his life, dotes on his teenage nephew, and has devised a contraption that allows him to write (holding the pen between his teeth) what will become his autobiography.

Nevertheless, Ramón remains matter of fact and unshakeable about his wish to die. He refuses to continue a life where time passes against his will and where, as he says, the short distance between him and another human being is insurmountable.

Many pivotal scenes occur between Ramón and his attorney, Julia (Belén Rueda), who has taken on his case pro bono because she believes in his cause. She also has a deeply personal reason for championing his quest for euthanasia.

Confined to his bed at his family’s farm in Galicia, Spain, Ramón becomes impatient when Julia interviews him about his life before the accident. He’d rather cut to the chase and discuss his euthanasia request, but Julia explains that the judges will want to identify with him as a person.

However, the legal system seems reluctant to identify with Ramón at all, and he and his supporters find themselves navigating

a rigid labyrinth. A Barcelona court initially denies Ramón’s request because it should have been filed in his hometown. In a federal courtroom scene, Julia’s co-counsel argues that the law does not prosecute people who attempt suicide on their own, but in cases like Ramón’s, where another person’s assistance is required, the system treats them like criminals. The lawyer also begs the judges to let Ramón address the court. His appearance there is an extremely rare outing for him. To Ramón, using a wheelchair is tantamount to accepting a “scrap” of freedom, but he has allowed his family to load him into one, carry him down the farmhouse stairs, and have him shuttled to the courthouse so he can testify and prove he is of sound mind.

Other key characters include Ramón’s bitter older brother, his kind-hearted and fiercely protective sister-in-law, and Rosa (Lola Dueñas), a local woman who impulsively visits Ramón after seeing him in a television interview.

While the film is sometimes painfully sad, it has moments of joy, inspiration, and humor. In one comical scene, a priest--a quadriplegic himself--visits Ramón to talk him out of euthanasia. His wheelchair won’t fit up the stairs, and Ramón refuses to be moved downstairs, so the priest sends his assistant to run up and down with messages until the two men finally resort to shouting their opposing viewpoints back and forth.

Bedridden for decades, Ramón’s chief means of escape are his classical music records, his writing, and imagination. In one unforgettable scene, he imagines himself soaring out of his window and flying to the ocean as the soundtrack swells with the Puccini aria

“Nessun Dorma.” Another poignant montage interweaves photos of Ramón as a robust young sailor with a heartbreaking flashback to his accident.

Acting only from the neck up, renowned Spanish actor Bardem (“Before Night Falls”) is remarkable as Ramón. The 35-year-old actor also spends most of his screen time in special makeup to transform him into a man in his 50s. His performance memorializes a man who wanted to die, yet lived his life with more grace than most people. The film is also an ode to the love and loyalty of Ramón’s family and friends.

Directed by Alejandro Amenábar, who also made “The Others” and “Abre Los Ojos,” “The Sea Inside” opens in theaters Dec. 17.