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?French Girls? Review: The Beauty of Being Unpolished

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In an industry built around polished appearances and the constant pursuit of being seen, Hyun Lee's French Girls finds something refreshing in the moments that are not performances. Its appeal lies in the awkwardness, uncertainty and unpredictability of everyday life.

Made for just $28,000, this Australian independent feature follows a young woman entering the modelling industry, but its greatest interest lies not in the promise of glamour, but in the awkwardness, uncertainty and unpredictability of everyday life.
Mia (Mia Kidis) is a construction worker in Sydney when a modelling agent approaches her with an unexpected opportunity. Her entry into the industry does not arrive with the usual cinematic transformation. There is no grand declaration of ambition or immediate sense that her life is about to change forever.

Instead, Mia seems to drift into this unfamiliar world, discovering that modelling involves considerably more waiting around than the finished photographs might suggest. Between castings, shoots and conversations with other models, she enters a profession in which her appearance becomes her livelihood, while the people around her help determine how that appearance should be presented.

What makes French Girls feel different is its refusal to manufacture glamour where there is very little. Lee understands the peculiar mundanity of the fashion industry, where long stretches of inactivity sit alongside the expectation that a model must always be ready to perform. The camera observes the preparation, the small talk and the unremarkable spaces surrounding the finished images. The result is a portrait of modelling that feels closer to a workplace than a fantasy, stripping away the spectacle without automatically condemning the industry itself.

This observational quality is particularly striking because the film features non-professional actors alongside its lead, Mia Kidis. Rather than relying entirely on the familiar rhythms of polished screen performances, Lee allows the people on screen to retain something of their natural mannerisms, hesitations and personalities. Conversations have a looseness that makes them feel overheard rather than delivered, while small reactions can be more revealing than an explicitly dramatic exchange.

Importantly, the film was not simply made without a script. Its naturalism comes from the way Lee developed the screenplay around the people she cast, incorporating workshops and elements of their real

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lives. The distinction matters. The film's authenticity is not the result of abandoning storytelling, but of allowing fiction to remain open to the unpredictability of real people. Some moments feel spontaneous precisely because the characters are not always required to behave in the way a conventional screenplay might dictate.

That blurred boundary between reality and fiction gives the film much of its personality. Mia does not always behave like a character carefully positioned to communicate a particular theme. She can be distracted, passive, curious or difficult to read. Her reactions do not always arrive when a conventional screenplay might demand them, and the film is often more interesting for allowing that uncertainty to remain. Instead of making every experience a turning point, Lee recognises that people frequently move through important changes without fully understanding them at the time.

There is something deeply relatable in this approach. Life rarely unfolds with the clarity of a three-act structure. Opportunities appear unexpectedly, relationships change in ways we could not have anticipated, and we sometimes find ourselves in unfamiliar situations before we have decided what we want from them. We do not always recognise a defining moment while we are living through it. Sometimes, we are simply trying to work out what comes next.

Mia's journey captures that uncertainty without turning it into an inspirational lesson. She does not need to have everything figured out, and the film does not insist that modelling must reveal her true calling or transform her into someone entirely different. She is allowed to remain a work in progress. For anyone still working out where they fit, what they want to pursue or which direction to take, there is something reassuring about a character who is allowed to remain uncertain. Her story suggests that not every opportunity needs to become a lifelong ambition, and not every experience has to produce an immediate answer.

This is also where the casting becomes more than a practical decision made on a limited budget. Non-professional performers can bring an immediacy that is difficult to manufacture, particularly when a film depends on the details of how people speak, move and interact. In French Girls, their presence contributes to the impression that these characters have lives beyond the scenes in which we encounter them. They do not always appear to be waiting for the next important line or dramatic revelation. Sometimes, they simply seem to be spending time together, and that ordinary quality becomes part of the film's emotional texture.

Kidis is particularly well suited to this restrained approach. Her performance does not depend on making Mia immediately understandable. There is an ambiguity to the way she carries herself, as though she is observing her own life while still trying to work out what to make of it. This is especially effective in a

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story about modelling, an industry in which people are constantly looked at, assessed and turned into images. Mia's outward appearance may be the reason she is offered an opportunity, but it does not necessarily tell us much about who she is. Kidis allows that gap between appearance and interior life to remain open.

The film's title also invites reflection on the images that culture constructs around women. The idea of the effortlessly stylish French girl has become a familiar shorthand for a particular kind of beauty, one that supposedly appears natural even when it is carefully manufactured. In a film about modelling, that mythology feels especially relevant. The fashion industry sells images that appear spontaneous while depending on preparation, selection and direction. Lee's film draws attention to the labour behind those images, revealing the waiting and uncertainty that disappear once the final photograph is published.

Yet French Girls does not turn this observation into a straightforward denunciation of fashion. Its approach is more curious than accusatory. Modelling can be absurd, tedious and uncomfortable, but it can also offer money, opportunities and new relationships. Mia's experience does not fit neatly into a narrative about exploitation or liberation, and the film is at its most compelling when it allows these contradictions to exist without rushing to resolve them.

The low budget reinforces this sense of immediacy. The film does not attempt to conceal every limitation through elaborate production design or visual polish. Its rough edges become part of its identity, giving the story a lived-in quality that a more carefully manufactured version might struggle to reproduce. The spaces feel inhabited rather than arranged solely for the camera, and the modest scale suits a story concerned with people navigating their lives without the resources or certainty to make everything look effortless.

The film is not without its weaknesses, however. At times, its narrative feels less assured when it moves away from the loose, naturalistic observations that give it much of its charm. Some of the more dramatic developments feel slightly contrived, as though the story is reaching for a conventional turning point when its quieter moments are already doing the more interesting work. It is a frustration in a film that feels most alive when it resists the urge to make everything happen for a reason. The contrast also highlights how difficult it can be to preserve the spontaneity of real life while giving a fictional story a satisfying shape.

Still, these imperfections do not diminish what makes French Girls worthwhile. Independent cinema can create space for stories that might otherwise be reshaped to fit established expectations, and Lee uses that freedom to explore a world often presented through an overly glamorous or sensationalised lens. The result is not simply a film about modelling, but a film about the distance between how people appear and how they experience their own lives.

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Ultimately, French Girls finds its appeal in the freedom to be a little untidy. Its non-professional cast, naturalistic dialogue and willingness to draw from real experiences create a sense of life unfolding rather than a sequence of moments arranged for maximum effect. Not everything works, but when Lee allows her characters to exist without forcing them into easy conclusions, the film finds something quietly compelling.

Perhaps that is what makes its unpolished approach so meaningful. We spend so much time trying to present the most convincing version of ourselves, whether to other people or to ourselves, that we can forget how much of life happens outside the frame we have carefully constructed. French Girls makes room for the awkward, the mundane and the unresolved. It understands that authenticity does not come from pretending a film has no script. It comes from knowing when to let the people within it breathe, and recognising that sometimes the most honest moments are the ones that do not appear to be going anywhere at all.

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