"Breaking the Waves" will be shown tonight at 6 and Sunday at 1:15 P.M. as part of the New York Film Festival. Brace yourself, and check your skepticism at the door.

RISKY does not begin to describe "Breaking the Waves," the raw, crazy tour de force that is the frenzied highlight of the New York Film Festival this year. Courting and sometimes winning ridicule, daring to fuse true love with lurid exploitation and pure religious faith, the Danish director Lars von Trier has created a fierce, wrenchingly passionate film about the struggles of a shy young woman who is goodness personified. Truly, bells ring in heaven for a heroine like this.

Yet Mr. von Trier, the famously eccentric Danish director of "Zentropa" and "The Kingdom" (one of his current projects is a thriller filmed in yearly three-minute segments, which he plans to finish in 2004), also has no qualms about dragging his film's gentle Bess through the mud. With a plot that owes as much to the Marquis de Sade as it does to higher-minded sources, Mr. von Trier begins his film as a powerfully carnal love story and eventually leaves it, by his own description, "treading on the verge of kitsch."

A narrative path leading from the sincere to the ludicrous, then culminating in a final image of flabbergasting transcendence, gives "Breaking the Waves" its surprising power. The film's visceral effectiveness is heightened further by the intimacy of Robby Muller's vigorous hand-held cinematography and by Mr. von Trier's formula-free affectations, which sustain their peculiar discipline while also indulging the film maker's every whim. "For more intellectual audiences the style will excuse the tears," Mr. von Trier has said mischievously about these tactics. "The intellectuals will be able to permit themselves to cry because the story is so refined."

Indeed, audiences for "Breaking the Waves" can be expected to spend an unusually long time studying the closing credits, regaining their composure after having been put through Mr. von Trier's wringer. The film's final impact is stunning enough to justify a few yawns and snickers along the way.

Set in the early 1970's in a tiny coastal Scottish village, effectively severed from the rest of the world, "Breaking the Waves" begins with the rhapsodic transformation of Bess (Emily Watson, making an astonishing screen debut) from a sheltered performance, and the film would have been destroyed by anything less. Ms. Watson creates Bess with a devastating immediacy, and she deeply rewards the camera's penetrating gaze. Also very good are Mr. Skarsgard as the sturdy and nominal time period could almost be taking place a century or two earlier. Mr. von Trier whimsically punctuates the film with chapter headings, too.

As Mr. von Trier fades his images into bleak natural tones, he creates a chilly and forbidding isolation for his characters. The audience must watch in horror as Mr. von Trier emphasizes every threatening clank of the oil machinery, and every glimpse of heedless playfulness from Jan and his friends. Then the accident occurs. Jan returns home grievously injured, and now he is suddenly bitter toward his bride. Jan sees Bess's sexuality as a mocking reminder of his loss.

So far this is melodrama; then it goes mad. With a pornographer's ingenuity, Jan thinks of a way to rekindle his own sexual vitality while testing Bess's devotion. Without Bess's help in this, he says he will die. So the film follows wide-eyed Bess off the deep end, through an odyssey involving red vinyl hot pants, degrading sex and a brief, leering appearance by Udo Kier. Adrian Rawlins, who plays Jan's doctor, prompts an inadvertent laugh in his first scene just by looking handsome enough to be a campfire tale.

And as "Breaking the Waves" requires Bess to make her leap of faith, it demands one from the audience, too. It's necessary to follow this quirky, single-minded film into parts unknown, trusting that the risk will be rewarded.

As Mr. von Trier fades his images into bleak natural tones, he creates a chilly and forbidding isolation for his characters. The church elders seen in "Breaking the Waves" espouse conventional thoughts of duty and punishment, displaying more faith in damnation than they do in divine mercy. Mr. von Trier counters that rigidity with near-lunatic flourishes that prove hugely effective, if only because they burst redemptively into the film with sudden flashes of pop vitality. The occasional animal intensity; she also articulates her prayers as two-way talks with a reproachful God. Chiding herself as unworthy in that stern voice, Bess still dares to pray for Jan's return. She gets her wish with the malevolent fatefulness of a ghost story or a campfire tale.

Nothing about "Breaking the Waves" is more fortuitous than the choice of Ms. Watson, the former Royal Shakespeare Company actress who so fervently and glowingly embodies Bess. The role calls for a trusting, absolutely unguarded performance, and the film would have been destroyed by anything less. Ms. Watson creates Bess with a devastating immediacy, and she deeply rewards the camera's penetrating gaze. Also very good are Mr. Skarsgard as the sturdy masculine presence so vital to the story, and the coolly forceful Katrin Cartlidge as Bess's straight-talking, sensible sister-in-law. She represents the rationality that "Breaking the Waves" eventually leaves far behind.

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