

RESUSCITATING IMPERFECTION

FILM REVIEW

Mouth to Mouth

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

Mouth to Mouth begins inauspiciously. Pierced-lipped, angry teenager Sherry (Ellen Page) is drawn into a cult-like, clean-living organization called Spark.

We eventually learn that Spark travels Europe in a couple of rundown buses, doling out methadone to the addicts it adopts and creepily urging its members to "Spark it up."

The trip starts in Berlin — tough to recognize given the array of Canadian, British, American and German accents — and moves quickly to other European cities. And it is not immediately clear who is who.

Tiger (August Diehl) is our introduction to Spark but turns out to be a peripheral character. Harry (Eric Thal) is the charismatic group leader, but we don't get to know him until the film is well underway. All very perplexing, to say the least.

Fortunately, a viewer's patience with *Mouth to Mouth* pays off, as it unfolds into a gripping and painful story of mind control and forced conformity. Harry represents the dangerous cult leader; he gets his charges off drugs but takes advantage of their weaknesses, sleeping with the women and berating all. Sherry is smart and willful enough not to completely fall under Harry's spell, but is she strong enough to break free?

It certainly doesn't help matters when Sherry's mother (Natasha Wightman) pops up and gives the bizarre Spark lifestyle her blessing.

The story is not entirely believable, and so there are times when our attention wanders. Page is, in a way, too good — she comes off as vulnerable, but her performance also conveys a wisdom that you'd think would have prevented her character from getting sucked into the whole mess in the first place.

Thal — who spends most, if



EGOLI TOSSELL FILM

August Diehl and Ellen Page: Not the kind of spark you think it is.

not all, of the film shirtless — is more credible as a man capable of developing a devoted following despite (or perhaps because of) a sadistic streak.

And then we are charmed by the supporting cast. The troubles that have driven these characters to Spark do not need to be spelled out. They are written on the actors' ravaged faces.

The film is well shot, and writer/director Alison Murray makes excellent use of the natural environments to underscore her message that what looks like

utopia from afar may be a hellish prison up close. Hence Spark's gorgeous rural retreat as a place of incessant insects and grape vines that bloody the hands of those who must cut them.

The film is ultimately successful in its quest to expose the impossibility of a perfect world. That may sound depressing, but *Mouth to Mouth* manages to make the epiphany an affirmation of freedom, as gratifying as it is sad. ★★★

National Post

msoupcoff@nationalpost.com