

EIFF Review – Tomboy

By **David Kettle**

✘ When a ten-year-old moves, with sister and parents in tow, to a new neighbourhood on the outskirts of Paris, making friends with the local kids is top priority. Asked by neighbour Lisa who he is, the child gives his name as Mikael, and later impresses the group with his swimming and football skills. He soon finds himself part of the gang.

So far, a charming comedy of childhood. It's only in an intimate bathroom scene that we discover that Mikael is actually a girl, Laure. So why lie about her sex? Was it a spur-of-the-moment decision? Her preference for boy's clothes, short hair and rough and tumble suggest not, and hint at more serious themes.

Celine Sciamma's second feature is that rare thing, a feel-good movie that poses tough questions, and deals with the thorny issues of child psychology and sexual identity. We follow Laure through the ever more difficult challenges she undertakes to maintain her deception – learning to spit convincingly on the football pitch, and in a poignant scene creating a plasticine sausage that will form an all-too-necessary part of her swimming disguise.

Yet Sciamma keeps the tone light throughout, and instead of heading inexorably towards the doom of discovery, focuses on the joys of playtime and small-scale interactions between children and adults. Her slow exposition of Laure's story is soft and delicate. Zoe Heran gives a remarkably naturalistic performance in the lead role, understated yet resolute, and she's matched by the gleeful six-year-old Malonn Levana as her impish sister Jeanne.

In focusing so closely on the world of children, Sciamma nevertheless draws parallels with attitudes in wider society.

But by bravely leaving her conclusion open-ended, she hints that perhaps Laure will feel able to define her own identity.

**Tomboy; French dialogue with English subtitles; France, 2011;
81mins**