

Fighting Words

E. Paul Edwards' directorial debut, *Fighting Words*, begins with these words: "Here's a recipe for poetry: begin with a healthy portion of heartache - thick and juicy. Add a pinch of death, a dash of despair. Allow to rise."

Well, the death isn't there-at least literally-but all other manner of specters of negativity hover like unseen characters just out of frame. A loquacious recasting of the underdog *Rocky* tale set against a fresh, contemporary backdrop, *Fighting Words* is about one man's quest to locate the requisite courage and discipline to match his passion. He has a foil, yes, but it's also a story about a young man's battle with himself.

A talented but down-on-his-luck poet stuck in a dead-end job, Jake Thompson (Jeff Stearns) is, when we first see him, unable to foresee a world in which his innate aptitude ever translates to an audience beyond a few drunken barstool pigeons. The film centers around Jake's burgeoning professional and personal relationship with admiring associate publisher Marni Elliot (Tara D'Agostino), who harbors a painful personal secret, and eventually his competition against successful freestyle poet David Settles (C. Thomas Howell) in the highly lucrative Los Angeles Poetron, a tournament-style gathering of spoken-word poets.

The success of *Fighting Words* lies in its savvy blend of the familiar and novel. The underlying love story is almost primal and subliminal; Jake and Marni's star-crossed fate isn't one of feuding families but rather their own hang-ups and the nasty reality of the 21st century sexual landscape.

The setting, meanwhile, provides a rich and modern tableaux of twentysomething anxiety and uncertainty. After the sudden cultural ascendance and almost as quick withdrawal of the beats, poetry for an entire generation-maybe more-basically returned to the shadows. It was a form of expression ceded to rock 'n' roll lyrics. In the 1990s, though, the first-person narratives born of rap music fused with raw, emotional new wave literature in an exciting and innovative way, and a bastard child was born - slam poetry.

Part public plea, part personal confessional, part braggadocio, spoken word open mike nights and contests sprung up in college campuses and large urban centers around the country. Poetry was no longer the weak, thin-armed younger brother of the artistic world, it was a loud, proud, ready-to-rumble primetime player.

Brimming with the same passion for wordplay, expression and connectivity that its characters display, *Fighting Words* features fine work from big screen newcomers Stearns and D'Agostino, and boasts supporting performances from a diverse cast that includes Fred Willard, Fred Williamson, Michael Parks and Edward Laurence Albert.