

Film Review

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Against the Tides



Fate takes a hand but Stefan Stuckert's film reaches harbour undamaged.



It can certainly be said that *Against the Tides*, Stefan Stuckert's documentary about the swimmer Beth French has emerged as a very different film from the one that he set out to make. Some critics who have remarked on that have concluded that the disruption of what was planned has resulted in an unsatisfactory work, but that is not a view that I share. The film may take a direction distinct from what was originally envisaged, but it emerges as a portrait of Beth French that amounts to more than a study of a woman setting out at the age of thirty-nine to create a record in the Oceans 7 swimming marathon. That challenge always involves swimming in seven sea channels where the conditions are difficult, but Beth's unique ambition was to become the first person to do it fully within a single year.

Beth set out from her Somerset home in 2016 to prepare the first swim, one crossing from Northern Ireland to Scotland. It covers some twenty-one miles and Stuckert was on hand with Damian Paul Daniel as his excellent photographer ready to film in 'Scope and colour'. At the film's outset, a chart is shown naming the seven channels which would take her to such places as

Los Angeles, Southern Spain and Japan. Obviously Stuckert could not know how successful Beth's endeavours would be yet the project must have looked to have the same kind of cinema potential as 2018's [Maiden](#) which charted the participation of Tracy Edwards in the Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race, Whether or not Beth could pull it off, she would be the heroine of a sports movie.

That is exactly how the first half of *Against the Tides* plays, and it does so very successfully. The swimming sequences, suitably varied in approach, are admirably shot and blended with footage in which we meet Beth's parents, her young son Dylan who travels with her (she is a single mother) and two people, Martin and Ella, who are employed as on-the-spot supporters who, from a boat alongside, can offer encouragement and advice. These two together with Beth herself provide voice-over comments here. The film is shaped by what we know of the itinerary but, over and above that, there is a sense that Stuckert has a real feel for organising his footage well. In addition to ensuring that individual sequences do not go on for too long, he is able to incorporate a number of elements to good effect: not only do portraits of the family members emerge, but he also allows Beth to explain why she finds freedom in the sea and reveals some part of her past history including how she overcame Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME) as a teenager.

It is in the film's second half that unexpected problems come to the fore: they stem from disabilities affecting young Dylan and from Beth's response to that, all of which creates a drama of its own. Quite reasonably Stuckert chooses not to intrude and consequently not every detail is filled in. Nevertheless, Beth's childhood experiences serve to explain how she reacts now and the film becomes less a record of a sportswoman than a rounded portrait of an individual seen at a time in her life when a crucial decision has to be made. As a result, *Against the Tides* has a character of its own and is no less effective than it would have been had it worked out as first anticipated - indeed what we have now can be seen as even more interesting.

MANSEL STIMPSON

Featuring Beth French, Ella Hewton, Dylan French.

Dir Stefan Stuckert, *Pro* Nick Read and Stefan Stuckert, *Screenplay* Stefan Stuckert, *Ph* Damian Paul Daniel, *Ed* Becky Way and Paul Carlin, *Music* Smith & Elms.

Oceans 7 Films/Zero One Film-Abacus Media.

87 mins. UK. 2018. Rel: 1 March 2021. Available on VOD.

Cert. 12A.