Film

Underground review – mine explosion disaster film digs deeper than most

★★★☆☆

Cath Clarke

Sat 21 Aug 2021

Here is an arthouse disaster movie from Quebec: a naturalistic, character-driven drama about what it might truly look like if a mineral mine exploded, trapping five workers underground. It's the second feature from French-Canadian director Sophie Dupuis, who herself grew up in a mining family.

She opens her film in the heat of the rescue: red lights flashing, a response team descending into darkness. One of the rescuers, Max (Joakim Robillard), would be the hero of the Hollywood version, running around hot-headedly, disobeying orders: "Fuck you! I'm going to get the others!" Actually, much of the film is about how damaging it is for Max living with this tough-guy masculinity.

Dupuis takes us back two months, shows him failing to be there for his girlfriend. He's also struggling to have a meaningful relationship with his best friend, who has been left with life-changing injuries after an accident, and is played so sensitively by Théodore Pellerin that I half-wished the film had been told from his perspective.

Depuis is brilliant on the dynamics in men's relationships. Unlike Max, most of her miners – macho dudes built like wardrobes who trade piss-taking banter all day – are sensitive to each other's mental health. They need to be: behind the controls of massive machinery, one lapse in concentration can be fatal for everyone. At the start of the shift the foreman taps his heart and head and asks each miner: "Are you OK here and here?"

When they come, however, I'm not sure the explosion or rescue are depicted with quite enough jeopardy or claustrophobia. Still, I loved the scene in the office immediately after the blast, as the foreman and a colleague mechanically follow protocol: making telephone calls, working through their checklist, on the edge of panic, swallowing their terror. This moment of calm is the antithesis to the action-stations style of a Hollywood movie – and is the more terrifying for it.