



The Runaways

Written & Directed by Floria Sigismondi
(Based on a memoir by Cherie Currie)

Principal Actors: Dakota Fanning & Kristen Stewart
+ Riley Keough & Michael Shannon



Kristen Stewart as "Joan Jett."

*In Floria Sigismondi's new film **The Runaways**, Dakota Fanning and Kristen Stewart play archetypes: two wide-eyed innocents, fractured halves of one whole, negotiating the drug-fueled, gender-bending, mind-blowing '70s.*

*How much is historically true? Who cares? **The Runaways** is a feature film, not a documentary, and what moved me most were the performances. That said, writer/director Floria Sigismondi and her team have all worked very hard to capture *The Runaways*' actual milieu.*

Countless films have depicted the role rock music played in breaking down racial barriers, now Sigismondi has done the same for feminism. And though their brilliant portrayals of Cherie Currie and Joan Jett, Dakota Fanning and Kristen Stewart will now inspire a whole new generation of girls. Bravo!

Penny's Points: *****

Floria Sigismondi's new film *The Runaways* is a fairy tale about two teenagers on the cusp of womanhood. Yes, it's based on Cherie Currie's memoir *Neon Angel*, and yes, it depicts real events in the lives of Currie and her *Runaways* band mate Joan Jett, but the strength of this film lies in its evocation of archetypes not its recreation of history.

Just like in the Brothers Grimm classic *Snow-White and Rose-Red*, "Cherie" (Dakota Fanning) is a somewhat passive blonde, whereas "Joan" (Kristen Stewart) is a more adventurous brunette. They find each other in a Los Angeles punk club in 1975 when they're both 15 years old. Cherie has tarted up with provocative clothing and heavy make-up; Joan has turned androgynous in a stylized biker outfit. They're complements, two eager innocents who are fractured halves of one whole. Eyes lock in the crowd; there's an immediate connection, but they're both too reticent to act on it.

The catalyst who bonds them together is rock impresario "Kim Foley" (Michael Shannon). Joan has been teaching herself to play electric guitar and when she meets Foley, he sees dollar signs. First he connects her with drummer "Sandy West" (Stella Maeve), and when he's sure they can really play, he sets out in search of a lead singer. He spots Cherie though the smoke-filled haze and Joan's whole face lights up. Bingo! Add two more guitars (Scout Taylor-Compton playing "Lita Ford" and Alia Shawkat

playing a fictional composite character named “Robin”), and rock’s first successful all-girl group snaps into place.

But first hours of practice in a decrepit trailer, while Foley screams, threatens and cajoles. Sometimes he mocks and humiliates them, other times he seduces them with soft words and pseudo-concern. Step-by-step, they advance from house parties to road trips, then a record deal, and finally a climactic tour in Japan. And all the while, the bond between Cherie and Joan grows ever stronger.

How much of this is historically true? Who cares? *The Runaways* is a feature film, not a documentary.

What moved me most were the performances. We’ve all watched these two girls grow up on screen. Dakota Fanning has been a star since the age of 7 when she played Sean Penn’s daughter “Lucy” in *I Am Sam* in 2001. Kristen Stewart has also spent years in high profile projects (starting with the role of Jodi Foster’s daughter “Sarah” in *Panic Room* in 2002), recently breaking through as “Bella” in the phenomenally successful *Twilight* saga. Like the characters they play in *The Runaways*, Fanning and Stewart are both at a perilous age now. Can they leave childhood behind and become women on screen? Leaving the theatre after *The Runaways*, my answer is a resounding yes!

Playing Cherie, Fanning gives an aggressive, gutsy, “in your face” performance. Her edge is so sharp that sometimes she almost draws blood. But raw scenes of her strutting on stage as “Cherie Bomb” are counterbalanced by tender scenes at home with her twin sister “Marie” (Riley Keough). There’s a moment near the end when Joan calls her “a bruised peach,” and it’s a perfect description.

Stewart’s performance as Joan is more interior but ultimately just as charismatic. She must convince us that she’s watching and thinking and learning every minute of every day, and she does. After all, if we know anything historical coming into this film, we know it will be Joan Jett, not Cherie Currie, who eventually makes it into the top echelon of the Rock ‘n Roll pantheon with her next band *Joan Jett and the Blackhearts*.

Of course, even though I sincerely believe that historicity in itself is ultimately irrelevant in a feature film, that doesn’t mean that director Floria Sigismondi and her team haven’t all worked very hard to capture *The Runaways’* actual milieu. In fact, they’ve scrupulously recreated the look and feel of the mid-70s from a feminist perspective. And Cherie Currie and Joan Jett both made themselves fully available to the team, most especially to the two young actresses portraying them.

Me, I never got anywhere close to the belly of the Rock ‘n Roll beast, but I am the right age to remember how it all appeared from the sidelines. This was a time of political turmoil all around the world, and people experimented with new social and sexual identities by literally painting them on. Girls who really wanted to “be somebody” had no choice but to reach out for male role models: in *The Runaways*, Cherie mimics David Bowie while Joan transforms herself into a mini Marlon Brando.

The Runaways Review – Special for WomenArts

In addition to directing, Sigismondi also wrote the screenplay, and she peppers it with dozens of tiny revealing incidents. Joan pays a teacher for electric guitar lessons, but after taking her money, he still insists girls can only play soft acoustic. When Cherie appears on stage for the first time, her classmates abuse her. Kim Foley hires local kids to impersonate hecklers; disgusting as these boys are, *The Runaways'* real crowds are far worse than the simulation. These moments combine to add cumulative force.

I remember; I was there. Growing up in the '60s, I had books about Joan of Arc on the one hand and images of countless wives and mothers on the other. I knew nurse and teacher were the only professions most women could aspire to—even most Catholic nuns were either nurses or teachers.

But Joan Jett really was one of the women who changed all of that forever. I loved watching her on MTV in the '80s (one of the only women I ever saw on MTV in the '80s), and I can easily picture myself, thrilled and exhilarated, dancing around my room in wild abandon. Joan Jett's voice gave me courage then; she still gives me courage today. And though their brilliant portrayals of Cherie Currie and Joan Jett, Dakota Fanning and Kristen Stewart will now inspire a whole new generation of girls.

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Stewart & Fanning.



Floria Sigismondi.



Fanning & Shannon.

SPOILER ALERT!!!

Please do NOT read until AFTER you have seen *The Runaways*

Sex & Drugs & Rock 'n Roll: yes, indeed, there's a great deal of all three in *The Runaways!* Everyone involved in front of the camera as well as behind it has worked extremely hard to capture *The Runaways'* actual milieu, and that **is** the way it was. So why am I recommending it so highly, and fervently hoping that a new generation of girls will be as inspired by *The Runaways* (as embodied here by Dakota Fanning and Kristen Stewart) as I was watching *Joan Jett and the Blackhearts* on MTV?

Of course, I'm not a parent, so I don't have to make decisions for children of my own. But as I've already said in several recent reviews (e.g., *An Education*, *Fish Tank* & *The*

Lovely Bones), I sincerely believe girls are more endangered by the things they don't know than the things they do.

The “Kim Foley” character in *The Runaways* is an expert manipulator. I have no idea how closely he resembles “the real” Kim and I frankly don't care. The character on screen (the only “Kim” I can judge) certainly bullies and harasses “his girls” emotionally, and there's no doubt he's financially exploiting them as well.

So why do they put up with it? First, of course, they're kids. Kim has all the power (reputation, connections, etc, etc); they have none.

In Sigismondi's version of this story, “Cherie” is also motivated by thwarted love for an alcoholic father. She craves attention, and that's precisely what makes her such a great performer on stage. Kim recognizes her vulnerability and preys on it. In one revealing scene, he tricks her into a solo photo shoot. I shuddered when I heard him disarm her by softening his voice. This creep knows just what he's doing!

Sigismondi's “Joan,” on the other hand, lives and breathes only for her music, so she consciously apprentices herself to someone successful enough to open doors. Stewart portrays Joan as preternaturally intelligent, disciplined, and determined. She knows that Kim is her way in; furthermore, she's able to accept the fact that his noxious methods are actually great preparation (even when he pelts her with dry dog turds during his “heckler drill”). Faced with real hecklers later, Joan revels in her ability to bat incoming right back to sender.

Again, I'm putting these names in quotes to stress the fact that I'm referring to film characters, not real people. I don't know any of these people, so I cannot and will not judge them.

Nonetheless, facts are facts: Joan Jett is now one of the best-known, most accomplished women in Rock history, while Cherie Currie has gone through hard times and made it safely to the other side. What Sigismondi shows in *The Runaways* is that girls can learn to say NO, and thereby mature into successfully self-directed adult women. So me, I thank Floria Sigismondi for making such a historically informed, important, empowering, and totally relevant film. See it today!

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The Hot Pink Pen (aka “Penny”) is the nom de guerre of **Jan Lisa Huttner**, a longtime Feminist activist & self-professed advocate for women filmmakers. Jan writes reviews of films by women directors & screenwriters for **WomenArts** (www.WomenArts.org), as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications & websites. She is the founder of **WITASWAN** (Women in the Audience Supporting Women Artists Now) & co-creator of **International SWAN Day** (with WomenArts' Executive Director Martha Richards). Jan's article on the '04 Oscars for *Women's eNews* received the award for “Best News Writing–Web” from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.



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