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### Sundance 2010: Katie Holmes, newly minted dramatic star?

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It's been a long time since Katie Holmes has had a lead film role, let alone a noteworthy one. She last appeared on the big screen as a co-lead in the critically eviscerated "Mad Money" two years ago, and before that had a respectable but small supporting part in the cigarette-lobby satire "Thank You for Smoking," a movie that began shooting exactly five years ago and came to Sundance four years back.



Which makes it all the more striking that she's back at the festival this year with not one but two films, the Kevin Kline-Paul Dano vehicle "The Extra Man" and the blue-blood dramedy "The Romantics." It's the latter film in which she does her most, and best, work in a long time, earning her the right to a second look from anyone who's written her off as so much tabloid fodder.

"Romantics" examines a group of seven longtime friends somewhere past the carefree part of their 20s but not quite at the point of actual responsibility. All of them gather for a wedding of two of their own -- a monied, uptight woman named Lila (Anna Paquin) who's marrying Tom (Josh Duhamel, a great catch to the women in the film but boringly milquetoast to those of us sitting in the audience watching it), having essentially grabbed him from under the nose of Holmes' Laura. Now they're at this wedding, and old grudges and desires flare up, particularly for Laura, who alternates between

spurning Tom and opening herself up to him again.

The film, with its depiction of a group of poetry-quoting young aristocrats, channels some of Whit Stillman's less enjoyable impulses. And the set-up of a tight-knit group with complicated dynamics gathering for a weekend wedding at a remote estate won't win any originality points.

But what prevents the movie -- the directorial debut of an indie producer named Galt Niederhoffer, who's adapting her own novel -- from going down a tedious path is a great climactic scene in which Paquin and Holmes eloquently and angrily trade emotional zingers. And what really saves it is the performance of Holmes, perfecting the likable-but-still-complicated persona she began honing on "Dawson's Creek" a decade ago.

Back then, Holmes was enjoyable to watch because she had a chance to play off her natural talents as someone we all might know (only prettier) and someone as smart and deeply considered as our best friend (only prettier). The actress is typically at her finest when she's not trying to be either too droll or hysterical, but taking a kind of level, occasionally even pleading tone that implies she's carefully thought everything through (and letting her brooding eyes do the rest).

These aren't attributes that were visible in her turn as a superhero love-interest in "Batman Begins," or in a host of genre roles (we're skeptical they'll be back for her next effort in that vein, the remake of the haunted-house thriller "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark"). And they were wasted the last time she

tried a dramatic indie part, in the obligatory screwed-up-girl role in "Pieces of April."

Most of the time, Holmes seems to be taking on parts that don't bring out her best and in which she doesn't even seem particularly engaged (a sharp contrast to her "Dawson's Creek" co-star Michelle Williams, who consistently shows just how seriously she takes her acting, proving it again just a few days ago at Sundance with the world premiere of the tonally on-point "Blue Valentine").

But Holmes' Laura character in "Romantics," a tortured but still grounded woman with reasonable resentments, is a perfect vehicle for her skills, and actually gives the actress a chance to showcase much of what distinguished her on "Dawson's Creek:" This also is a talky part, and one in which she has to be grounded even as she's the center of a coiled drama (and one in which she also happens to find herself in a complicated relationship with a man she's known for a long time).

Holmes can still sound a blandly diplomatic tone that comes from spending too much time out in the media glare. Niederhoffer is "so talented and so smart and so generous and open to all of our ideas and willing to let us try things," she quickly goes to at the after-screening Q&A when asked about her approach to the role.

And she still sounds a little ambivalent about her place in the film industry -- asked whether producing might lie in her future, as it did here, Holmes said Niederhoffer "asked if i wanted to be more a part of it on a producing level and I said, 'Why not?'" But "Romantics" shows what Holmes can do when she does care and is trying. After seeing this film, fans and the industry will take notice. We'll see if she does too.

-- Steven Zeitchik

*Photo of Katie Holmes from Getty Images/Getty Images for CDG*

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