

INTERVIEW

Non-lesbian screen director Emma-Kate Croghan, 25, is riding the crest of international acclaim for her debut film, *Love and Other Catastrophes*, an Australian Gen-Xer comedy about a group of university students. The primary story line is the breaking up of the relationship between two of the young women, Danni and Mia. And what is nicely remarkable is that none of the characters comment at all on the fact that it is two

Cinema

women who are at the focus. How refreshing—and perhaps, a slight exaggeration from the reality of same-sex society down under.

"While we played the lesbian relationship as sanguine about being so casually out," Croghan says, "in real life it's not as easy. But sometimes in the arts you have an opportunity to show life and bend things to the way you'd like them to be. From a storytelling perspective, the problem of coming out just wasn't that interesting to us—it's more progressive to not mention the 'L-word' at all. At university, in the subculture they all live in, the lesbianism wouldn't have been discussed as it's totally accepted by their crowd."

Which raises the question of how the cultures of the United States and Australia differ in their tolerance of lesbians and gay men: "When I've traveled with the film, the reaction to the sexuality in the film has been most pronounced in America. We thought [of] Australia as a hick country, but the attitude in dealing with sexuality can be fluid for us, whereas for Americans, the press come off as shocking or difficult when discussing sex. I'm surprised. We find these to be strange attitudes," says Croghan. "During one of the early U.S. press junkets, a middle-aged reporter delicately asked actress Rada Mitchell, who plays Danni, 'Now, can you tell me about your character? You play a lesbian; would you have preferred to play another character in the film?' Her face was worth a million; it said it all—about her distaste in even being asked the question. Rada answered, 'Yes, it was OK with me.' But then Matt Day [who plays Michael in the film] responded to the question: 'My character's a heterosexual and we decided not to make a big deal about it.' Everyone laughed and he was embarrassed. But we never experienced that [kind of questioning] anywhere else."

Love and Other Catastrophes is a screwball comedy in the tradition of the 1930s, a style which Croghan readily admits was influential to her development as a writer and director. "I used three films as a model: [Ernst] Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*, [George] Cukor's *Holiday* and [Leo] McCarey's *The Awful Truth*."

Mia (Frances O'Connor) is in love with Danni (Mitchell) but doesn't want her to move in with her as she fears commitment. Other plot lines

A KISS ON THE CHIC

Young Australian filmmaker Emma-Kate Croghan tells a queer tale to stand out from the crowd

by Dale Reynolds

concern Mia trying desperately to enroll in the crowded class of a favorite writer/teacher; Alice (Alice Garner), who is seeking the perfect male counterpart only to take up with the gorgeous Ari (Matthew Dyktynski), the paid stud to a variety of women; and Michael (Day), who lives with four other straight-dudes-from-Australian-hell and who's trying to move in with Mia and Alice. It's all wonderfully realized, silly and heartfelt at the same time when—in the nature of screwball—

May, *True Love and Chaos*.) "We are a nation based on shipped-over convicts, and America is a nation based on Puritans and censorship. We went for the same-sex story because of a need for twists which would help make our film unique. In American films, homosexuality is made such a big issue, but we didn't want it to be an issue at all. It just happens to be two girls."

Neither of the actresses are apparently lesbian themselves, so when it came to the big romantic



Croghan (left) and Efthymiou on the set of *Love and Other Catastrophes*

Omnia Vincit Amor, or Love Conquers All.

While Australia is, like every other country on earth, heterosexually based, it also has a huge queer population—when the annual (queer) Mardi Gras party explodes in the spring, approximately 600,000 people either participate, gaze from the sidelines, or watch on television from all over the continent. It's a marvelous party which brings approximately \$42 million U.S. into the Australian economy. But gay folk tend to congregate in the major cities—Sydney, Melbourne or Canberra, creating the same urban ghettos known so well in San Francisco, L.A., London or Berlin—and thereby have some influence on the rapidly growing and respected Australian film industry.

"I'm not a lesbian, although I am asked that a lot," says Croghan. (She lives with the producer of the film, Stavros Andonis Efthymiou, himself a director with a feature set to open in Australia in

smooch, they felt the need to fortify their courage with vodka before the shoot: "Well, we made the film, first and foremost, for ourselves," Croghan observes, "and we wanted it to be natural. I think in Australia we have more leeway on individual sexuality on film. In American cinema you can kill as many people as you want, but that you don't have [on-screen] sex seems to be the order of the day; you can get away with violence [rather] than showing even heterosexual sex. And full-frontal male nudity is out of the question in this country, is my understanding."

Everyone in the film worked on deferred payment—which is not uncommon in low-low-budget independent filming. And as they were all film-school grads, the two-week script write and the 17-day shoot went by smoothly and professionally. "The good part of such a quick write/shoot was that there was no time to think ourselves out of an

action. We thought it, then shot it. And the actors were good enough to do it."

With a two-week script, you automatically have problems, so improvising became an option: "We knew we didn't have to stick that closely to the script, but the story structure is what didn't change. Looking back at it now, I would have liked to have had the actors improvise more on camera, but we didn't have the money to buy enough film stock to allow it. But the actors did have a lot of input into changes."

Most of the initial funding was found through the regular channels of family and friends. The Australian Film Commission came on board after the producers assembled a rough cut (a print without music or color-correction) and advanced the money to finish the production. "We weren't kids from the suburbs who'd never seen a camera before—we'd been to film school. We sold it to distributors who took it to Cannes [Film Festival]. Fox Searchlight Pictures saw it at a screening in Paris and bought it before we played Cannes, which meant we arrived with a huge American distributor attached, which then generated interest everywhere else."

The film has since been sold all over the world, except for India. As for the film's success, Croghan says, "the attention to us has come much more quickly than we had expected."

To the broader question on why Australian films are getting such strong attention in the United States, she says, "We were influenced growing up on American films—they were the films which most filled the screens; after all, America is the largest producer of English-language films in the world, so you can't help but just go and see them. But we are also the first generation of filmmakers exposed to all countries' film work through video."

As with many smaller films, the crew ended up shooting guerrilla-style—without official permits and by running up a lot of overtime (which wasn't paid until they sold the film). "I was confident in the ideas and in the structure [of the piece] although the dialogue was a bit of a worry for us. We were working so fast, with not much time. But it all got into the can by the end of the day. I had no self-doubt while we were doing it; I just went with it. We knew when things weren't working, and we fixed them at the moment. That's the best you can do."

Croghan has a couple of new ideas she's working on now: another romantic comedy, a sci-fi adventure, a thriller and one with "she-fellas"—an exploration of a woman bank robber. Her production company is called Amateur Films, and in her opinion, *Love and Other Catastrophes* is "an unprofessional film which did well. And now it'll be slightly easier to raise the funds for the next film."

Love and Other Catastrophes opens Friday, April 25, at KOIN Center Cinemas. Call 225-5555, category 4608, for show times and prices.

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