

FILM

Resting on her laurel

High Art director's second film is as good as the first

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Like her first feature, 1998's *High Art* (for which Ally Sheedy received raves for her starring role as a drug-addicted lesbian photographer), Lisa Cholodenko's *Laurel Canyon*, which opens April 18 at Fox Tower Cinemas, is painstakingly true to its themes of sexuality, boundaries, creativity and responsibility.

The writer/director makes every effort to avoid using her characters as easy-to-pinpoint examples or as role models. This must be why they seem so real, so vulnerable—why we, like their creator, come to feel protective of every last one of them.

Laurel Canyon is an area of Los Angeles that, from what Cholodenko's camera shows, is the domain of rich bohemians: big (yet strangely ramshackle) houses with swimming pools and sun-dappled views, set back from dusty roads, with an air more demure than regal. It's in one of these that East Coast psychiatric med student Sam (Christian Bale) plans to stay with Alex (Kate Beckinsale), his aspiring geneticist fiancée, on a working vacation of sorts.

The house belongs to his mother, Jane (Frances McDormand, shining as usual), a legendary record producer of fluid and irrepressible sexuality (she's been through a number of male and female lovers) with whom he, a buttoned-down type if ever there was one, hardly sees eye to eye. Mother and son comprise a mutual toleration society at best.

Mom isn't supposed to be there when they arrive, but due to a delay on the album she's producing with an up-and-coming English band in her home studio, the self-serious prepie duo are exposed upon arrival to a group of shaggy rock 'n' rollers pouring liberal amounts of wine, wearing what look to be yesterday's clothes and getting high.

While Sam is tortured by his attraction to a fellow resident (Natascha McElhone), Alex tries to concentrate on her thesis. But something from outside the makeshift study room beckons her. Maybe it's the steam coming off the swimming pool, where Jane and the band's lead singer (Alessandro Nivola) frolic in the nude—or just the casual insouciance, disregard for rules and perpetually fulfilled appetite they represent.

In the canyon the always-shining sun can fool you into thinking all rules are petty and anything is possible. The young couple find themselves tempted in ways they assumed they couldn't be.

In turn, the presence of Sam and Alex—with whom Jane and the singer begin a lusty flirtation—forces Jane to ponder the viability of living her life as if no limits exist to her desires. Her son has clearly never been both-

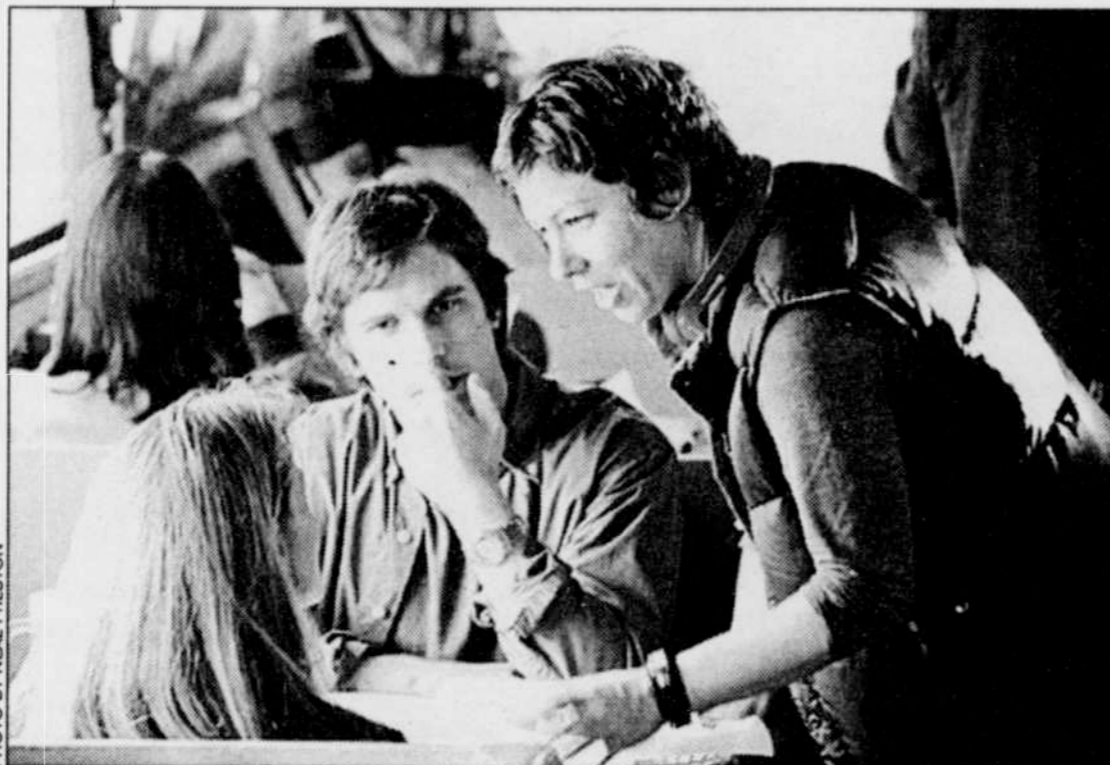


PHOTO BY NEAL PRESTON

Left: Dyke director Lisa Cholodenko on the set with Kate Beckinsale and Christian Bale. Right: Frances "too hot" McDormand likes young boys and girls in *Laurel Canyon*.



ered by her being with women, but it's hard to imagine something more hurtful or unhealthy than a parent who seduces your betrothed.

It's a tinderbox of battling emotions and values, but Cholodenko, capturing something

endemically relaxed and pastoral in the geographic setting, lets things unfold in a way that, soaked in so much natural light, is less momentous than organic. (This movie belongs with Joan Didion's essays and Hole's *Celebrity Skin*

album in the pantheon of bemused, quasi-objective Californian myth exploration.)

She isn't afraid to find the humor when it's there, and for a movie that engages on the cerebral level, it's remarkably sexy. When Alex joins Jane and the rock 'n' roller in the pool and passionately kisses them both, you can feel the lightness and freedom of the moment—you can understand how negative repercussions would seem impossible, and why Jane clings to the illusory belief that everyone can get what they want without anyone getting hurt.

Cholodenko realizes that the erotic conversation a character engages in can quite effectively reveal something essential about them, and McDormand proves beautifully that the lack of self-consciousness—ease in one's own skin—is powerfully sexual regardless of age.

The question *Laurel Canyon* asks is, "How can we acknowledge the stickiness—the complexity and frustrations—of these things every human being deals with

(desire, sex, emotion) while celebrating their innate value, their necessity and goodness?"

Her answer: with as much respect and empathy as we can muster, coupled with a staunch refusal to judge, diminish or simplify. **JM**

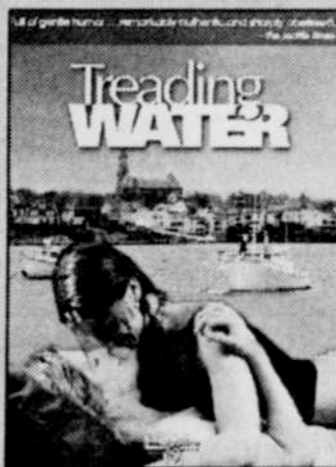
OUT ON VIDEO/DVD

TREADING WATER

Wolfe Video

Like so many low-budget indies that come from and are marketed to the queer community, Lauren Himmel's *Treading Water*, which played at last year's Portland LGBT Film Festival, existed almost solely on the festival circuit before recently going to video and DVD without an "official" theatrical release.

Unlike many of those movies, this writer/director's effort deserved a better fate. To put it in terms of recent cinematic movements of interest, *Treading Water* is akin less to works of far-reaching, sometimes-skewed imagination (*Far from Heaven*, *Adaptation*) than to solid, low-key, realist achievements of clarity (*The Son's Room*, *You Can Count on Me*).



Himmel's story, co-written with Julia Hollinger, is a stoic look at the push and pull of everyday life, relationships and familial conflict centered on a young New England lesbian couple, Casey (Angie Redman) and Alex (Nina Landey of *Guiding Light*), who reside on a modest but cozy boat docked not far from the palatial shore-side house of Casey's family.

Alex, a social worker, wonders why Casey won't bring her home to her staunchly Irish Catholic family's Christmas gathering. Casey, who defies her family's bourgeois parameters by living out her dream to be a longshorewoman, can't convince Alex of the complicated hostility of her mother (Annette Miller, oddly sympathetic despite her character's grim, destructive stubbornness), which extends to both Casey and Alex but also to her husband and other children.

Alex's role is further complicated by her professional relationship with Casey's younger brother, who has been caught dealing drugs at his private boarding school. The brother doesn't know about Casey and Alex, nor does Casey know about his criminal activities.

Interjecting some much-needed levity is Alex's friend Carmen (Lysa Apostle), visiting from the city. Carmen, bless her, is all leopard prints and lustiness; she's bemused and exasperated by these strange, tense, fraught people she finds herself among.

Fully a third of *Treading Water* reveals Himmel's reach exceeding her grasp, relying too heavily on contrivance and cliché. The rest is a dignified post-closet acknowledgment of the pain and disruption being honest about yourself can trigger, and a celebration of the chances for true contentment that come from a life lived openly.

—CM **JM**

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