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MATTHEW

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SPRING MOVIE PREVIEW | LAURA LINNEY ON *THE LIFE OF DAVID GALE*



family affair

You often hear actors praised for "letting themselves be vulnerable" for a role. It could mean that an A-list starlet bares a nipple, or a bitter veteran sheds a tear.

For 23-year-old Vancouver actor Sonja Bennett, it meant starring in this month's *Punch* as Ariel, a maladjusted 18-year-old who has sexual designs on her father, Sam, and punches out his new girlfriend after overhearing her call their relationship "creepy."

But exploring a taboo subject isn't what makes Bennett vulnerable. It's that she did the film despite the fact that her father, who also happens to be the writer/director, claims it's based on their own relationship.

"I was single until [Sonja] was 10, I saw her only on weekends. I adored her. She was the funniest, most charming female I knew," Guy Bennett explains in his director's notes. "Sam and Ariel are a projection of what my daughter and I might have become had we not made corrective measures."

Pretty uncomfortable stuff. So why did Sonja do the movie? Because she doesn't see their relationship that way at all. "Whatever seed of truth there is in *Punch* about my father and my relationship, it's still that it's his reality, not mine," says the apparently very well-adjusted Bennett on the phone from her boyfriend's apartment in Vancouver.

Here's how she remembers it: She was always the centre of attention on those weekend visits. "And then one day he had a new girlfriend and all of a sudden I was sitting in the back seat of the car instead of the front. I remember feeling very hurt and quite abandoned and almost dumped," she says with a bit of a laugh. "In my version the daughter is a very young, very vulnerable child and in his version she's a psychotic, manipulative, violent 18-year-old. I mean...it's a pretty big stretch."

So did she ever ask her dad not to tell people the story was based on them? "Yeah!" Bennett exclaims. "Yes, I did. And what we have basically worked out is that he can say what he feels

and I can say what I feel and it's okay if those things contradict."

While *Punch* may sound like the typical depressing stuff of so many Canadian films, truth is, it's a quirky film that borders on humorous. "That's something that has been a big surprise to me," Bennett says. "I always felt like we were shooting a drama and then when it came out people were calling it a black comedy. I love that. And I think the humour comes out of how desperate these characters are and then you get to a point where it's so brutal there's almost nothing you can do but laugh."

Compelling performances also set it apart, and when the film played the Toronto International Film Festival last September, Bennett's didn't go unnoticed. After the film, Fox TV's vice president of casting, Marcia Shulman, gave Bennett her card. "I didn't think anything of it," she says. "It just sat in my wallet and I really thought it was just a gesture." But a month later Shulman tracked her down, "and she said that she hadn't been able to stop thinking about the film and my performance and she wanted to have lunch with me." Fox then flew her to L.A. where she was put on contract.

This month Bennett's in *La La Land* auditioning for various pilots. "They want to use me," she explains, "but they're not sure for what."

—MW