

Sundance Film Review: 'L.A. Times'

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Sundance Film Festival

The challenge of finding the right romantic partner seems to be the theme of every other American indie at Sundance, and "[L.A. Times](#)" definitely suffers from privileged-white-people-natter-on-about-their-relationships fatigue. But first-time writer/director (and also star) [Michelle Morgan](#) brings just enough specificity, and a surprisingly sharp eye, to make the film an interesting calling card for future work. Whether there's anything here that will appeal beyond a very small niche audience is another matter.

With a heavy dose of Whit Stillman and sprinklings of Woody Allen, Noah Baumbach, and Lena Dunham, among others, Morgan explores the intersecting lives and romances of three thirtysomething Angelenos,

beginning with Annette (Morgan), an aspiring writer whose withering judgment of everyone and everything in her life proves impossibly irritating.

Annette's boyfriend Elliot (Jorma Taccone) is the creator of a Z-grade "Game of Thrones" knockoff called "Haggard's Landing," which has raised his professional profile but done little to earn him the respect of perpetually demanding Annette. But then nothing earns Annette's respect, as her stalwart BFF Baker (Dree Hemingway) knows all too well.

While Baker suffers the indignities of dating in L.A. — a fling with a wealthy client (Tate Donovan) of her interior decorating business ends badly, and her cousin (Kentucker Audley) keeps promising to set her up with a colleague who never materializes — Annette decides she's not happy with Elliot and breaks off their five-and-a-half-year romance. As she tells friend Nora (Nora Zehetner), who seemingly has an ideal relationship with actor b.f. Michael (Antonio Cupo), "When you're with the right person you just know."

What Annette doesn't quite realize is that she's such a pill, most men will bolt at the first opportunity. And those little things that annoyed her about Elliot — he likes playing games, he isn't good at building things — aren't that unusual in the city. Elliot, meanwhile, falls into despair, refusing to lose himself in meaningless flings at the suggestion of his show's leading man (Adam Shapiro), and hitting it off with an assertive mystery woman (Margarita Levieva) who turns out to be an escort.

As Annette, Baker, and Elliot continue on their separate paths, an overwhelmingly bleak portrait of single life begins to emerge. But the view of relationships Morgan appears to be working toward — nobody's perfect, so appreciate what you have — winds up a little pat for the self-inflicted wounds her characters keep trying to emotionally bandage.

The writer/director dresses up the ordeals with florid language and

attempted witticisms, but lines like “Palm trees are very condescending” and “You think the painting is imposturous” elicit more eye-rolls than chuckles. It doesn't help that the lead players aren't very good company: Annette is too annoying, Elliot too bland, and Baker too passive (despite Hemingway's captivating performance).

And yet as a first-timer, Morgan promises better things to come on two fronts: The spiky character roles she creates for Levieva and Angela Trimbur, as a volatile “other woman” pivotal in reorienting Annette's point of view on relationships, both succeed in bursting the film's hermetically sealed bubble. Following either of these ladies outside of la la land might have been a worthy endeavor. And the precise and playful visuals, composed with d.p. Nicholas Wiesnet, do more than anything else to distinguish the film from too many others of its ilk.