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'Heavens Knows What' star knows all about the street life film depicts

By **MARK OLSEN** JUNE 1, 2015, 4:30 AM



"You want to know the kind of longer story, but it's crazier?"

Arielle Holmes was recounting how she went from being a homeless teenage drug addict on the streets of New York City to starring in a fictionalized adaptation of her memoir, a film that met with acclaim at festivals around the world.

"Heaven Knows What," playing now in Los Angeles and New York and set to expand around the country, is directed by the filmmaking brothers Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie based on Holmes' unpublished memoir "Mad Love in New York City."

The film has a relentless energy, by turns harrowing and moving, as it follows a young woman named Harley (Holmes), whose life is hyper-focused on the twin addictions of heroin and her destructive boyfriend, Ilya (Caleb Landry Jones). When not with the dark and mysterious Ilya, Harley hangs around another addict, Mike (Buddy Duress). Their days are spent hustling and scraping for the essentials of food, shelter and the next fix, but also companionship and solace.

With bold filmmaking choices — including a bravura title sequence that compactly depicts Harley's time in a hospital after a suicide attempt — the movie plunges the viewer into this forbidding world.

"I think the movie is 100% true," Holmes said. "There are things that are exaggerated or different, but we've all talked about how sometimes in a movie to capture the feeling of the truth you need to be more drastic. But as far as the feelings and emotions, even the things that are exaggerated are really based off the truth."

Working with cinematographer Sean Price Williams, the Safdies kept the camera on a tripod or Steadicam and used long lenses to shoot from as far away as they could, even for close-ups. This created an immersive look and feel for the movie, something of a dark, romantic psychodrama horror

story, conjuring what Josh Safdie called "the opera of the street."

"We went so far out of our way to make it not a documentary," Benny Safdie said. "But the end result is people still feel like it's real."

Holmes, 21, is originally from Bayonne, N.J. ("not a place you'd want to go," she said). She first tried heroin at 17 and was homeless off and on for three years. She would often redraw comic book panels, and one day while she was panhandling for spare change — spanging, it's called in the film — a man saw her drawings and asked if she was interested in jewelry design.

This led to an unpaid internship in New York's midtown jewelry district, where the Safdies had been researching a separate, long-gestating project. Josh Safdie one day approached a young woman he thought would be a Russian office worker but turned out to be Holmes. The two struck up a friendship, and a short time later she revealed to him the truth of her situation.

Convinced of Holmes' potential screen appeal, with her heavy-lidded eyes and sharp features, the Safdies tried to create a role for her in other projects. At the same time, Josh encouraged her to write her story, which she did in part by typing in Apple stores for upward of nine hours at a time. Those pages became the basis for the screenplay to "Heaven Knows What."

"My attraction was we found a movie star. And like all the great movies, you make a project for your star," said Josh, 31. "And her story happened to be extremely interesting, as well as the insight that she brought to it. She was so present, yet so removed, there was such a contradiction at play. And the drama of it is incredible. Like a full-on opera."

Benny Safdie, 29, noted the difference between Holmes' life and the abundance of stories about homeless people, kids and drugs.

"I think it was the way she described people, the names and the details, all of that was something new, a different perspective on this life," he said. "It was a life that I didn't know about, and it was just interesting to dive into."

Though Josh had been meeting with Holmes for months, Benny didn't meet her in person until right before filming began in March 2014.

"In a way, it was a balancing act of objectivity and subjectivity," Benny said. "Josh was in the thick of it, and I was holding back. So for a long time I only knew her through the writing. It was like a check-and-balance thing. The movie, it had to have these perspectives in order to be what it is. You can't have just one thing."

This unconventional mix of fiction and reality is nothing new in the work of the New York natives.

The 2008 film "The Pleasure of Being Robbed" was about a young woman who stole what she needed partly for necessity and partly for some madcap view of the world. The 2009 film "Daddy Longlegs" was a semi-autobiographical tale of two young sons raised by a single father. Their 2013 documentary "Lenny Cooke" told the tale of a high school basketball star whose career fizzled out before it even started.

A touch of slapstick eccentricity is often in what they do, such as when Josh Safdie passed himself off as a Ukrainian immigrant to an on-the-street TV newscast during a hurricane in 2011. Last fall at the Toronto International Film Festival, rather than doing interviews in a hotel suite or booth at an upscale restaurant, Holmes and the Safdies could

be found in a combination bicycle shop and cinema club down an unpaved side alley.

"Heaven Knows What" also played high-profile festivals in Los Angeles, New York and Venice, Italy, and picked up two prizes at the Tokyo International Film Festival, including best director. The film played at the documentary-centered True/False festival in Columbia, Mo., and was nominated for a Heterodox award at the doc-focused Cinema Eye Honors. The prize is given to films that "illuminate the possible on both sides of the fiction/nonfiction divide."

In the New Yorker, Richard Brody lauded the film for its "unflinching roughness and intense tenderness." Holmes is the grounding force in the film, her performance alert and alive to the very elemental stakes of the story. Benny Safdie recalled that on the first day of shooting, his sound equipment picked up Holmes between takes asking herself over and over, "Is this a dream?"

"Before I started doing this, I thought it would be very strange, doing things that happened to me," Holmes said. "But when I was there, I thought, even though this event might have happened to me, it happened all the way back there. I'm not in that moment, feeling those things anymore. I'm somebody else now, I'm 100 light years away. So I had to re-create the emotion within myself. So even though it was something that already happened, it was something new."

Holmes was on methadone during production, and after shooting finished the Safdies paid for her to go to a rehab facility in Florida. Recently she has been living in Los Angeles, trying to make a go of it as an actress. Duress, who played Mike, was convicted of drug-related charges after filming ended and was in jail when the movie was on the fall festival circuit. He's out now and taking acting classes in New York. New York magazine reported that Ilya Leontyev,

Holmes' ex-boyfriend and inspiration for Jones' character, died of an apparent overdose in April at age 25.

Holmes has said that she had been living second to second. Now, after writing her memoir, starring in "Heaven Knows What" and getting clean, she has started seeing beyond the moment.

"Time has changed since then," Holmes said. "I realize now that it exists. Not everything has to happen instantly."