

NEXT STOP: 'LAST KISS'

Zach Braff's new film helped director Tony Goldwyn grow up

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Actor Tony Goldwyn has only directed three movies, but it has happened every time: He catches the star on the rise.

In his 1999 gem "A Walk on the Moon," Goldwyn worked with Viggo Mortensen just as the actor was poised for superstardom in "The Lord of the Rings." In the little-seen 2001 "Someone Like You," Goldwyn cast Hugh Jackman as a romantic leading man when most others still thought he was just an "X-Men" hero with claws.

Now, in the comedy-drama "The Last Kiss," Goldwyn's got Zach Braff of TV's "Scrubs" and the film "Garden State" (which Braff also directed) just as he's ready for bigger things.

"Zach's just coming into his own as a performer," says Goldwyn. "In a way, this character is a whole new thing for him. In 'Garden State,' good as he was in it, he was more reacting to all the people around him.

"In this movie, Zach really drives the thing."

A remake of a 2001 Italian film, "The Last Kiss" follows four young men in Madison, Wis., scared stiff about the onslaught of adult responsibilities. Izzy (Michael Weston) wants to escape on a road trip after being dumped by a girlfriend and tending to his ailing dad. Kenny (Eric Christian Olsen) has a strict policy of no-strings sex. Chris (Casey Affleck), married with a newborn baby, stays late at work rather than dealing with the overwhelming needs of his young family.

And at the center is Michael (Braff), who's got a gorgeous — and pregnant — girlfriend (Jacinda Barrett) who doesn't mind his fear of marriage. And no wonder: her mother (Blythe Danner) is about to reveal an extramarital affair and leave her dad (Tom Wilkinson).

"There's a lot required of Zach as an actor — he has to be funny and emotional and empathetic," says Goldwyn. "Somehow, he manages to maintain the audience's empathy throughout the movie, even during the moments they hate him."

Despite Goldwyn's knack for heat-seeking actors, directing is a midcareer switch for him. He worked for many years as an actor, playing everything from a memorably evil

yuppie in "Ghost" to a closeted TV star on "The L Word." He was even the voice of the title hero in Disney's 1999 animated film "Tarzan." And he has been behind-the-scenes on TV, guiding episodes of "Grey's Anatomy," the new drama "Kidnapped" and Showtime's "Dexter."

And Goldwyn of course has movies in his blood: His grandfather was Samuel Goldwyn — the G in MGM — and his father is producer Samuel Goldwyn Jr.

"'The Last Kiss' was a film that really interested me because it felt very real,"

Goldwyn says. "When I read the script, I thought it was a chance to make a film that could be funny and entertaining, and honest about how hard it is to navigate relationships and commitment.

"And it involves the process of coping with crises, of all sorts. What happens when life doesn't go the way you planned it." ♦



CLINCHING IT Director Tony Goldwyn (above, on set) says with "The Last Kiss" (below), actor Zach Braff "comes into his own," while co-star Rachel Bilson "is so confident, it's like she's been acting for 20 years."

