

2/15/04

● REALLY BIG SHOW

She's Too Young

14 going on sex-teen

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THE sexually charged lives of American teenagers comes under scrutiny in "She's Too Young," a Lifetime TV-movie that comes complete with a set of statistics that will very likely scare the living daylights out of any parent.

One in five kids has sex before they're 15. One in seven 14-year-old girls has been pregnant and 50 percent of 14-year-olds have gone to parties where there was no adult supervision. But perhaps the most alarming part of this movie about Hannah Vogel, a 14-year-old suburban high-school student who contracts syphilis, is that she's a smart kid with good self-esteem whose mother does everything you'd expect of a good parent.

In "She's Too Young," Hannah (Alexis Dziena), who plays the cello and gets good grades, finds herself attending parties where kids drink, do drugs, and have group sex. Hannah's mom, Trish (Marcia Gay Harden) doesn't know anything about this underground culture until a syphilis outbreak at Hannah's school gives parents — and educators — a much-needed reality-check.

The world depicted in the film would seem too sensational if it wasn't so real, says screenwriter Richard Kletter, a divorced father of two teens who also wrote the 2001 Lifetime movie, "After Amy" with Bridget Fonda.

"The idea [for the film] came to me because of an incident at a private school my daughter was attending," he explains. "On the front page of the school newspaper was a story about eighth-grade girls [performing oral sex] behind the gym. There was a parent meeting and the fathers of girls nearly got into fistfights with the fathers of boys. Ever since, I'd been wanting to do something on that subject. Lifetime sat on the script till 'Thirteen' came out. That emboldened them."

But unlike that film, in which Holly Hunter plays the dysfunctional mom of a sexually promiscuous thirteen-year-old girl, the mom played by Harden is nearly ideal. She always gets phone numbers in case of emergencies and calls the parents of other children Hannah is spending time with.

In other words, you can be an ideal parent "and it still happens," says Harden, a Best Supporting Actress Oscar-winner and nominee this year for "Mystic River." Besides, says Harden, who is expecting her second child, "there's no such thing as an ideal parent. And I believe even with parents who are checking up, their kids are going to do this anyway."

Still, Harden felt her character needed some fine-tuning. "Initially, they [made] my character a workaholic. That's fine, I said. But let's not give each parent a fault and a strike against them."

Kletter agreed. He didn't want to give adult viewers the chance to say, "We're not like that; that couldn't happen to us."

"Sexual promiscuity is pretty easy to dismiss if somebody is stoned or making incredibly bad choices about boyfriends or is a religious zealot and reacting to extreme restrictions," he says.

As Hannah, Dziena says that the sexual behavior in "She's Too Young" was unfam-



Newcomer Alexis Dziena plays a good girl who succumbs to peer pressure and pays the price.

iliar to her; growing up in New York, she didn't see the same pressures on teens that were depicted in the movie.

"I feel like things like this happen more [often] in the suburbs," she says. "In the city, there's a lot more to explore that doesn't involve sex." But the actress adds that working with a seasoned pro like Harden made it easier for her to recapture the feeling of being fourteen again.

Kletter hopes that young people will watch this movie with their parents — even if, in showing what some thirteen- and fourteen-year-old children are up to, he's made a film that some parents might feel is actually inappropriate for kids that age to watch.

"If this had been a feature, we would have gone much further," Kletter says. "The real stories are much worse. I think there's a responsibility in making an issue-oriented movie. We wanted to make something that would not turn off the kids so they would watch it with their parents."

That's might be wishful thinking, even for kids like Dziena who are over 18 and more mature. "My parents haven't seen the movie yet," she says with a laugh. "I'm sure there will be at least one moment of [them saying], 'Oh God, I hope that wasn't what she was doing at 14.'"

She's Too Young
Monday, 8 p.m., Lifetime