



July 7, 2002

Her Family Grown, Jill Clayburgh Is Starting Over

By JENNET CONANT

AEWOMAN came up to me after one of the screenings the other day with tears pouring down her face and sobbed, 'My God, you've defined my entire life for me on the screen,' said Jill Clayburgh, shaking her head with the wide-eyed look of amazement that has been her trademark since her breakout role in Paul Mazursky's 1978 hit, "An Unmarried Woman." "I don't exactly know why, but people always seem to see echoes of their own lives in my films. They really feel for me."

It's about to get worse. Audiences who identified with Ms. Clayburgh's hilariously neurotic New York divorcee in "An Unmarried Woman," and rooted for her as the mousy school teacher who has to compete with Candice Bergen to win Burt Reynolds's affections in Alan Pakula's 1979 romantic comedy "Starting Over," will find it hard not to share her pain at the prospect of re-entering the dating scene at middle age in "Never Again," which opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles and in other cities July 19.

Ms. Clayburgh, who earned consecutive best-actress Oscar nominations for those early star turns, admits the appeal of doing another romantic comedy is that it completes a kind of cinematic triptych, bringing back her familiar discombobulated but determined heroine. When her character loses it in an early scene in "Never Again" humiliating herself and embarrassing those around her it is an instant reminder that few actresses play single, emotionally frayed women as well as she does. You laugh at her performance, and at her predicament. After all, here she is, two decades later, playing a 50-ish divorced mother whose daughter has just left for college and whose love life has been on hold for so long that she hasn't had sex in seven years.

"She is struggling to find herself and her sexuality at a culturally confusing time, when everything is up for grabs," Ms. Clayburgh said. "I mean, we're right back there, aren't we? I just read that Time magazine cover story about that book by Hewlett's "Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children" by Sylvia Ann Hewlett "with all this new information about how you have to have your kids by the time you're 12 or it's all over. Please." Her throaty voice rising in exasperation, she added: "As if people weren't panicked enough about the whole situation. I've been getting calls from my younger friends saying: 'What should I be doing? When should I be doing it? Aagghhh!'"

The role in "Never Again" is Ms. Clayburgh's first starring role in a feature film in more years than she can remember. It was a voluntary absence during which she stayed at home while raising her two children, Lily, 19, and Michael, 16, with the playwright David Rabe, whom she married shortly after completing "An Unmarried Woman." "I just didn't work that much while the kids were growing up," she explained, ushering her guest into the large family kitchen of her Litchfield County, Conn. house. She offered a cup of good black tea and a plate of lemon squares, then led the way to a cozy living room dominated by an enormous fireplace and deep, well-used sofas, one of which was occupied by a snoozing dog.

"Never Again" was written for her by Eric Schaeffer, who also directed and produced the film, and whose previous efforts include "My Life's in Turnaround" and "If Lucy Fell." Mr. Schaeffer approached Ms. Clayburgh and Jeffrey Tambor, her co-star in "Never Again," in early 1999 on the first day of shooting of a pilot for the NBC sitcom "Everything's Relative," in which all three had been cast. Recalling the moment recently, Mr. Schaeffer said over the phone: "I went up to her and Jeffrey and told them how much I admired their work and said, 'Look, if this series doesn't succeed, I'd really like to make a movie with you.' It's always the first thing I think of when I meet someone I'm enamored with. When I was still driving a cab and I met actors I liked like Martha Plimpton, Phoebe Cates I immediately pitched them, which was how they wound up in my first movie."

Mr. Schaeffer said he could not resist making similar overtures to Ms. Clayburgh, who at 58 has retained her lithe figure and soft red hair, her impish charm undiminished by the lines on her face. "She was such a menschy mom, running around the set in Birkenstocks and old sweaters and offering everyone chicken soup," he recalled. "At the same time, she was fall-down funny, and could pull off this smart, sophisticated, subtle comedy with tremendous depth. I was intimidated by her because she was a real movie star from the old school."

Ms. Clayburgh considered Mr. Schaeffer to be a "nice boy," but never gave him offer a second thought. Four episodes later, the sitcom was canceled. Then, a month after that, the late-night calls from Mr. Schaeffer began. "He'd call me up," Ms. Clayburgh said, "and ask me things like, 'What do you think of this scene, Jill?' And we'd talk about it for hours, and I would tell him stories about myself and my friends, but it was still a little hard to believe. I thought, well, this would be nice if it worked out, but, you know, I'm not selling the farm."

Not one to be easily discouraged, Mr. Schaeffer told her he would write anything she wanted. "Comedy or drama, chocolate or vanilla, it was her choice," he recounted. Ms. Clayburgh wanted to do a comedy, so Mr. Schaeffer complied, creating the character of Grace, who must overcome her fears if she wants to find romance and move beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy of her personal credo, "Never again." "I think all the women in this movie are so sexy," he said, referring to Ms. Clayburgh and to Sandy Duncan and Caroline Aaron, who play friends who coax Grace back into the singles scene. "Whatever it is that happens to women when they drop all that baggage like marriage, career, babies, whatever makes them tense that's when they begin to be really terrific. They have all their ducks in a row. Jill is one of the most together, grounded people I've ever met."

Fortunately for Ms. Clayburgh, her personal life has not paralleled her art. "Jill has been wonderfully, happily married for a long time," said Mr. Mazursky, an old friend who finds it amusing that some of her fans might have a hard time accepting that the iconic, liberated, single woman had morphed into a soccer mom. At the time of "An Unmarried Woman," she was already involved with Mr. Rabe, who had a son, Jason, by a previous marriage. And after she had focused solely on her career for years, it had "suddenly occurred" to Ms. Clayburgh that she would like to have a child. She and Mr. Rabe, by then her husband, decided to leave the city when she became pregnant, stopping in Mt. Kisco, N.Y., for several years before moving farther up the Saw Mill River Parkway to a small town that, she proudly notes, is "90 minutes from the nearest mall." (She asks that the town's name not be revealed.)

"Growing up in the city can be very confining," she said, curling up in a corner of the sofa like a cat and hugging her mug of tea close to her body. Ms. Clayburgh, the daughter of a manufacturing executive and a former theatrical production secretary, was raised on the

Upper East Side and attended the Brearley School. She was, by her own description, "a wild teenager," wearing strappy little dresses, smoking on street corners and getting her kicks by shoplifting at Bloomingdale's. "I wanted my children to have a different experience, a life that wasn't going to be the whole, you know, 'the father's a playwright, the mother's an actress' New York thing."

Ms. Clayburgh took up acting after a classmate at Sarah Lawrence College convinced her to try summer stock, and went on to make her Broadway debut in "The Rothschilds" in 1970, followed by "Pippin" in 1972. The following year she lost the role she coveted most, the lead in Mr. Rabe's play "In the Boom Boom Room," though she eventually landed both the part and the author. She admitted to being somewhat dismayed when her daughter, Lily, who plays Grace's daughter in "Never Again," recently announced her intention of following in her mother's footsteps. Sounding for a minute as desperate as the characters she plays, Ms. Clayburgh said: "I told her: 'You can sing, paint, write, just don't be an actress. It's just so insecure, and you are always at everyone's mercy for your work.' Naturally, now that she's committed, I fully support her."

Mr. Schaeffer said that the only time he ever had a problem with his star was when her daughter was on the set. "That was the only time she was neurotic, which is completely understandable."

Indeed, Ms. Clayburgh recalled that she and Mr. Schaeffer fought long and hard over one scene in the film, which called for her daughter to walk in on her when she is in bed with Mr. Tambor. "I kept saying, 'Oh my God, I can't do this,' " she recalled. "Of course, he didn't listen to me, and he was right about that. I'm sure the fact that it was Lily was making me extra insane."

Mr. Tambor, who is probably best known for his role as the smarmy sidekick on "The Larry Sanders Show," said by telephone that Ms. Clayburgh "has this na•vet* that is beautifully orchestrated, but you should know that it is fashioned by a huge intelligence. She's nobody's fool, but there is something about her work that is so seamless that you just accept all of her."

By late afternoon, a tall, fair-haired young man wandered in, introduced himself as Ms. Clayburgh's son, Michael, and, after a brief consultation with his mother, beat a hasty retreat. Now that her children are almost grown and out of the house, Ms. Clayburgh said, she looks forward to working more. At the invitation of an old friend, the playwright Israel Horowitz, she is doing two one-act plays with her daughter this summer in Massachusetts at the Gloucester Stage Company, which he runs.

She also has become intrigued by some of the new shows being developed for television. "When I started it was really regarded as the bastard child," she said. "But so many really good young writers are working in television now because they want to see their work." She recently completed a pilot for a comedy in which she played a wife caught between her liberal son and her ultra-right-wing husband, played by James Caan. The show, written by Eric Gilliland, who made his name writing for Roseanne Barr, "was very political and out there, full of these jaw-dropping Bush-bashing jokes," Ms. Clayburgh said. "I guess it's no surprise it didn't get picked up."

At the sound of the approaching footsteps of Mr. Rabe, who works in a studio at the end of the driveway, she rose. Walking outside past the red tulips in her garden, she mentioned that she was considering a return to the city, if only in the form of a small pied ^ terre. "Never Again" was shot on location all around the Upper West Side, where Ms. Clayburgh remains something of a real estate legend. It is almost impossible to view an apartment on West End Avenue without being told by a broker that she once lived in the building.

"It's true," she said, chuckling as she recalled a particularly unsettled period in her life. "I must have lived in 12 different apartments, all in the same year." Then, as though it explained everything, she added, "It was a very cold winter." ÈÈ