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# Falling apart and getting it together

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## Clayburgh's new role completes a woman's trilogy

**By Jennet Conant**

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'A woman 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 Clayburgh's hilariously neurotic New York divorcee in "An Unmarried Woman," and rooted for her as the mousy schoolteacher who has to compete with Candice Bergen to win Burt Reynolds' 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 next Friday in San Diego.

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," 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 ('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? Aaggghhh!' "

### **Out of spotlight**

The role in "Never Again" is 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 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." Schaeffer approached 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, 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 < Martha Plimpton, Phoebe Cates < I immediately pitched them, which was how they wound up in my first movie."

Schaeffer said he could not resist making similar overtures to 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."

Clayburgh considered Schaeffer to be a "nice boy," but never gave his offer a second thought. Four episodes later, the sitcom was canceled. Then, a month after that, the late-night calls from Schaeffer began. "He'd call me up," 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, Schaeffer told her he would write anything she wanted. "Comedy or drama, chocolate or vanilla, it was her choice," he recounted. Clayburgh wanted to do a comedy, so 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 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 < 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."**

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