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Malin Åkerman on *Romantics*, Romcoms and Her Surprising Truth About Improv

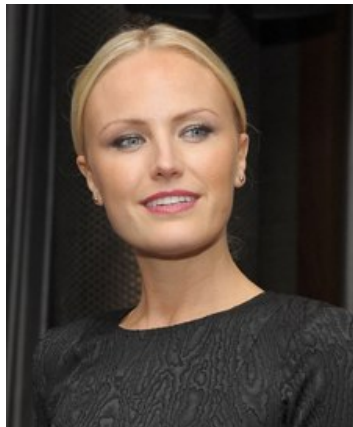
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When we all last heard from Malin Åkerman, she was preparing for the hometown premiere of her fiery drama *The Bang Bang Club* in Toronto. But for at least one more weekend, she's keeping an eye on her darling *The Romantics* as it expands into limited wide release. The ensemble film features the Swedish-Canadian actress as Tripler, one of several college pals reuniting for the marriage of Lila (Anna Paquin) and Tom (Josh Duhamel) — over the simmering objection of Tom's ex Laura (Katie Holmes).



Soapy? Sure. It's also a well-acted, dynamic glimpse at a cluster of peers on the verge of *something*, a mystery adapted by writer-director Galt Niederhoffer from her own novel and brought rousing to life by a group also including Adam Brody, Elijah Wood, Jeremy Strong and Rebecca Lawrence. Åkerman talked with Movieline about the exhilarating ensemble feeling, how she picks the *right* romantic comedies, the joys of playing the sidekick and the secret to playing a "tough chick."

I knew this about you from way back, but I keep reading you're still in a band. True or false?

Not any more. But it was a good start. I got *something* out of it.

That is something. Why did you quit? I mean, come on! Side project!

We didn't get any record labels!

Now's your chance!

Well, thanks to Auto-Tune it can sound great. But you know how it is. I'd gone to L.A. to try and do acting, but after the first year of auditions I really didn't get anything. I found these guys and started a band. *So much fun*, but it was a little bit more far-fetched than the acting side of things. I went back to try the acting, and that's when it caught on. And I thought, "OK, this is a sign I should be doing acting and not the singing career." So it literally just came to a point where I was sleeping in a couch on a studio; I had no money to pay my rent. I said, "Guys, I'm going to give acting one more shot. If it doesn't work out, I'll go back to Toronto and finish my schooling." I was in university in Toronto for a year; I was a psychology major. But then it all just... *began*.

And you've been in, like, every movie made since then.

It's been good! It's been a good few years.

How did this one come to you?

I got the script, and I was in Sweden visiting family. I had a phone conference with Galt, and we chatted. I loved the script I just thought it was a romantic comedy, but a little bit more poetic. It's a different formula than other romantic comedies you usually see. It's not a blockbuster romantic comedy; it's a little more artistic. I just loved the relationships between the characters. I loved the

debauchery that went on the night before the wedding — and the debauchery all the way through the end of the wedding. I thought my character Tripler was a lot of fun, and I just saw a lot of things we could do with her. I always like a character who's the life of the party and who gets people going. So I hope it brought some light to the film, even though there are some secrets are dark moments that come out in the film. Everybody has a light side and a dark side, and it's nice that these aren't just one-dimensional characters.

What kind of name is “Tripler”?

I do not know.

You never discussed its provenance or meaning?

Well, we have to ask Galt. We did, but now of course I've blanked. That was many, many moons ago. I do remember telling her, “I really like that character with the funny name.” But because I had read the script months earlier, I completely blanked on the name. I think it's something like a nickname for “Veronica III.” I can't be sure; you'll have to ask her. Something like that. Don't tell her I forgot.

I asked this of Adam Brody as well, but all these characters seem to be facing their last chance at something. What's Tripler's?

Making out with Adam Brody's character? [Laughs] I don't know if it's so much a “last chance” as it is sort of a revelation for her. Or not a revelation, but a confession. I think Tripler is very much the one who keeps it together, and like I said, when you have someone who's grown up as the life of the party, you don't want to be a downer. I think there's a moment between her and Adam that allows her to tell the truth for once and confess to someone. But I think she sort of sees herself and her life as a kind of failure, what with her acting career. I also feel like she's not going to change after this. She's going to go back to being Tripler. So it's not really a last chance — just a confession before she moves on with her life.

Literally — it was a lovefest. It was the perfect title for the film, because we were the Romantics.

What were the bonding rituals like for this cast? How did you develop relationships?

They were developed so quickly. I think being in Greenport in the winter - when everything is closed down and there are maybe three restaurants that are open — you can't really run away from each other. You're all staying at the same hotel, you're

all hanging out together. Luckily we all loved each other. Literally — it was a lovefest. It was the perfect title for the film, because we *were* the Romantics. It was magic; I don't think I've ever felt this way about every single cast member. We've all kept in touch; we've all wanted to see each other again and again and again. We organize dinners, and every time I'm in New York I call Galt and Jeremy. We love each other, and that's a really special thing to have.

That usually only happens on location. If you're shooting in L.A., and a lot of the cast lives in L.A., they go home. You have dinner with your husband and kids or whoever. I'm the type of person who doesn't want to sit alone in a restaurant or bar. So it was a lot of bonding over food and drinks and daytrips; renting a car and going down to the Hamptons. So we did a lot of things together, and everyone was game. Everyone was in the same zone.



You mentioned a moment ago that this is kind of a more literate version of the romantic comedy. But you're generally in standouts of a genre that's gotten bludgeoned over the last few years.

Yeah, there have been a lot of bad ones.

But you've done good ones — this, *The Heartbreak Kid*, *The Proposal* — for the most part. How do you choose them?

You just don't know. You jump in kind of blind. There have been scripts that I've read that I think are hilarious, and then you see them done and say, "Wow, what went wrong?" So it's really hard to tell. I think you have to go with your gut instinct. I think I have to go with the ones that make me laugh, or the characters who are interesting to me that I think I can *do* something with. I don't ever want to play a character — not that she can't be a bitch or anything — that I wouldn't personally connect with. I think it's just a matter of choosing something challenging that you think you can shine in. For me, anyway. It keeps me alive and awake. But you don't *ever* know. I've been lucky that the scripts I read were funny on the page and worked out onscreen as well.

I have to say: *Couples Retreat*, when we got that script, was a work in progress. What you see onscreen is not at all what you saw in the first draft. There was a *lot* of rewriting during, before, and a lot of improv. That happens a lot with comedies I've been in. There's always a lot of improv, which is the magic of the moment. That's fun as well.

It seems like there's a lot of improv in this one, which is kind of surprising considering the filmmaker adapted it from her own novel.

Yes, there is. Galt is so amazing. She was so open to any kind of suggestion. She just really understands, because she's produced a lot as well. She's not just a writer in her first time on a film set. She understands that characters come alive when you let the actors come alive — when you let the actors live and breathe them. The tone of the character shifts a little bit, and if you allow that to happen, I think that makes it more natural and more believable. She was open to allowing that to happen. And once you know who your character is — when you do enough preparation — you go in and do improv and you're on that same path. You may be using different words, but you're saying the same thing. You have the same arc.

And you feel pretty good doing improv?

I really do. Also, I'm highly dyslexic, so it takes me a long time to learn lines. I get horrified when I have to do table reads with the whole cast, because there's a lot of stuttering coming from me, so I have to do a lot of prep. Whenever there's improv, I'm like, "Great! No lines." It's so funny,

I switch sentences up. It's just the dyslexia that comes in.

because you do get directors who are more adamant about the words — especially writer-directors. They want the words to be precise. And I do end up changing words, and it doesn't make sense, and I understand why they want me to say the words because I switch sentences up. It's just the dyslexia that comes in. So sometimes I have a really hard time learning sentences and lines. That's when it's nice to have a lenient director: "Oh, yeah, sure... that works!"

Getting out of the idea of genre, what specific characters appeal to you?

I shouldn't say this, but I always love the sidekicks. I want to do a leading-lady role in a film — *absolutely*. But I find that a lot of times I get attracted to the sidekick role. They stand out a little more because they're quirker, they're funnier, they're crazier. *The Heartbreak Kid* is one of my favorite roles; I loved it so much. But for some reason, those are the characters I really get attracted to because you can have so much fun when you play with them. I always try to ask my directors, "Let me go as crazy as possible, and then you pull me back, so we can making something really exciting out of it." You can give them so many levels.

And I love physical comedy as well. Anything that's physical comedy? Bring it on. But there's nothing specific. Sometimes I just love the movie and want to be a part of it even if the character's not given that much to do or isn't that complex. Or sometimes it might not be the best script but the character's just too good to pass on. No specific genre, either. I mean, I finished a film with Bruce Willis and Forest Whitaker [*Catch .44*] where I play a drug mule.

A drug mule?

Yeah, well she works for Bruce. She goes and picks up drugs and drops them off. That kind of stuff. She thinks she's a tough chick, but I definitely played with all her layers and gave her some issues that made her really human and vulnerable. If there's one thing that bugs me, it's when sometimes you get these female characters who play tough, but there's nothing behind it. So you see this actress playing tough. And that's why it's hard sometimes to watch women as assassins or whatever.

But then you get the ones who have more of a vulnerability to them, and the toughness comes out of trying to protect themselves or survive. That's a lot more interesting. I tried for that. I don't know if I succeeded, but we'll see what happens. It was a really fun character to play with; it was definitely one of the most difficult characters I've played.

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