

Michelle

As Oscar-nominated actress Michelle Williams gives yet another coruscating performance in her latest film portraying a grieving mother, she talks to *Jennifer Dickinson* about life after Heath Ledger, bringing up their daughter Matilda and finally finding what she's always been searching for
Photography by Ryan McGinley Fashion editor Kate Young

My

Belle





“I feel like
I’m a *believer* in
not *fighting*
circumstances,
accepting where
you are and
where you’ve
been”

Previous page: sweater, \$880,
and shorts, \$720, both by
Rosetta Getty; sunglasses by
Kate Young For Tura, \$295
This page: sweater by Gabriela Hearst,
\$1,295, at Net-A-Porter.com; briefs by
Nu Swim, \$74; hat by Christy’s, \$49



Dress by
Altuzarra, \$1,995

Michelle Williams is getting beaten. Soundly so. Luckily, she's only a little bit sore about it. We're playing a marathon session of cards in the net-curtained front room of her holiday rental, and although she is the only one who has played the game before and shuffles like a pro, it's her 11-year-old daughter Matilda Rose who is winning every hand, convincingly; the maternal pride in Williams' soft voice only very slightly encroached by frustration. At this point in time, the fading days of August, mother and daughter are wriggling their toes in the disappearing grains of sand of a blissful summer together, indulging in the simplest of pleasures: cycle rides, swimming in the sea, ice creams, soft ball and dog walks with no need for a leash. Escaping their New York home and the usual school/work routines for the past few weeks has had the desired effect – contentment.

Today, the 36-year-old actress appears just that, content. It's the kind of worn-in, low-budget happiness that comes from spending your days wearing cut-off denim shorts (the fashion industry might constantly cite her yolk-yellow Vera Wang Oscars dress as one of the best red-carpet looks of all time, and Louis Vuitton, the most luxe of labels, has made her its face for the past three years, but really this woman excels at careless, girlish style), with a dog-eared book on parenting and a pair of scratched Ray-Bans thrown into a basket bag with one broken handle. It's so perfectly picturesque it could be a movie – not that Williams would star in it, that would be far too light-hearted for her CV.

She is a fully paid-up member of that select school of actresses whom directors and writers go to when they want a powerful performance, in Williams' case, a very understated, penetrating kind of power. Her impressive body of work, which includes *Brokeback Mountain*, on the set of which she met Matilda's father, the late Heath Ledger, and *My Week With Marilyn*, attests to her unquestionable talent. So it's shocking when she says candidly, "In the past three years I have found it really hard to get work. It is very seasonal, you know, your popularity or marketability or whatever these things are, and I've been like a little bit in a winter." Nevertheless, hers has been a fertile winter. Straight from a Tony-nominated turn on Broadway in playwright David Harrower's incredibly demanding *Blackbird* – "A six-and-a-half-page monologue every night – I think that's my most challenging [part] so far" – Oscar buzz is building around her performance in Kenneth Lonergan's devastating portrayal of child bereavement, *Manchester By The Sea*. The idea was originally conceived by Matt Damon and John Krasinski, who approached award-winning writer Lonergan (*You Can Count On Me*, *Gangs Of New York*) to realize the full story. Casey Affleck plays Lee Chandler, the ex-husband of Williams' character Randi. When his brother dies, Lee is forced to return to his old home to look after his nephew, resurfacing the trauma of a tragedy the couple suffered years earlier, which destroyed their marriage. Affleck dominates in a searingly painful performance. When she first read the script, Williams says her first thought was that she wished she was a man so that she could play Lee. Her own screen time is far shorter, but her performance is pivotal, raw and drenched with emotion.

A month later when we meet again in London, Williams is in the midst of the film's promotional tour. We grab dinner before a BAFTA Q&A with Affleck and Lonergan, and it's eye-opening to witness her five-minute transformation from a denim dungaree- and no makeup-wearing sharer of shepherd's pie (she orders extra mash) to a scarlet-lipped serious actress clad in Louis Vuitton sequins. The contentment is still evident, but this time it's courtesy of a whirlwind trip to Paris to shoot a new Vuitton campaign and an illicit shopping spree. Indeed, the entire *Manchester...* team is on a high. Affleck, she says, is a different person; Lee's intense, tormented character was apparently a hard one to shake off. "When we were filming he was like a locked box that somebody had thrown away the key to," she elaborates. "We had a lot of fun >

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Dress by Michael Kors, \$4,775



shooting the earlier stuff [before the film's tragic epicenter], then it was all downhill from there." Even Williams, no stranger to an emotional role, found her part a hard one to leave behind. One particular scene, where Randi's future goes up in flames, left her ravaged. "I couldn't stop crying. It's like the darkest part of your heart, something happening to your child," she shudders. Randi's courage in just staying alive was what struck her most. "She's making a brave choice, moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. Because it is a choice. I would exit. It would be so much easier than living with the loss."

Produced on a meager budget ("We bought my wig on Canal Street in New York, in one of those stores where they sell T-shirts and key chains"), *Manchester...* is definitely in the art house genre, making the positivity surrounding it all the more rewarding. Williams is no stranger to the budget end of filmmaking ("The food!" she laughs when quizzed on the main difference between big and low budgets. "On smaller movies breakfast consists of coffee."), and her passion for some projects means that she signs on for the experience rather than the salary. "When I made *Wendy And Lucy* [the 2008 indie hit], I think I made something like \$6,000, and when it came time to promote the film, there was no budget for things like when you go to premieres and you get these nice people to make you look better than you normally do. There was no budget whatsoever. I had already offered my salary to the director, I can't remember why, there was something where she said, 'Oh, we don't have the money,' and I was like, 'You can have my salary!' So when it came up that we didn't have money for hair and makeup, she said, 'Can you use your salary for that?' I was like, 'Yeah, of course!'"

Although her career kick-started with TV teen drama *Dawson's Creek* in 1998, the actress's tastes since have tended towards the tormented. From the cheated wife in *Brokeback Mountain*, to one half of an imploding couple opposite Ryan Gosling in *Blue Valentine*, a manic depressive alongside Leonardo di Caprio in psychological thriller *Shutter Island* and her Oscar-nominated turn in 2011's *My Week With Marilyn*, Williams finds thick emotion in the smallest moments. It's all a far cry from what she set out to achieve. "My big influences were sitcoms," she says. "I remember getting really excited about TV nights: *The Wonder Years*, *Saved by the Bell*. It wasn't until I moved to New York and started seeing art house cinema that I thought, 'Oh, that looks even better than being a guest star on *Full House!*'" Her ambitions might not have been lofty then, but Williams wasn't fazed by chasing a dream. She legally emancipated herself from her parents at the age of 15 so that she could move away from the family home in San Diego to Los Angeles and pursue her chosen career unhindered. She lived on her own, subsisting on pizza and canned goods. "It was a young bravado, for sure," she smiles, breezing past any discussion about what led to such an extreme move. "The scariest thing was all of the rejection, not getting jobs, the lack of anything good happening." Despite that, she never considered doing anything else. "I remember going to an audition one day and seeing these two older actresses talking. They were probably the age I am now, and they seemed so ancient! I remember one of them showing the other her new headshot and saying, 'Do you think it looks too retouched?' And then telling a story about how she had been asked to wear a sheer shirt to an audition. I remember how critical they were about their faces, about getting older, about their kind of appeal, and I remember thinking, 'Uh oh, I don't want that, I don't want to wind up there.'"

Williams is very far from winding up there. She's not the kind of actress blockbusters are cast around, but then happy-ever-after Hollywood endings are anathema to her. "Whenever I read those [scripts], I'm like, 'Eurgh, if only there *was* resolution in life, but there isn't.'" She is not raging against the industry though, the inequality of female opportunity or the constraints placed on filmmakers and their actors; it's not that she isn't smart enough to see the issues – Williams is a devourer of books and operates on a higher plane of emotional intelligence – but she's had to prioritize her battles. "I wish I was somebody who fixed things," she says, "but I don't have that kind of internal energy. I am more focused on making a good life for myself and my daughter. I'm just not as involved with systemic problems in the industry, I am really more interested in the cracks in my personal relationships and how to fill them. That's where I like to do my thinking and solving."

Most of that thinking is focused on her daughter. The actress has been a single parent to Matilda since Ledger passed away from an accidental overdose of medication when she was two and a half. From that day on, her life has been lived through the filter of grief and its impact on her little girl. "Let me see how I say this," she pauses, considering. "In all honesty, for pretty much everything else, I feel like I'm a believer in not fighting circumstances, accepting where you are and where you've been. In pretty much all senses but one. I would be able to go totally down that line of thinking were it not for Matilda not having her dad. You know, that's just something that doesn't... I mean, it just won't ever be right." How has grief changed her? "There's no way it *doesn't* change you. The only positive is that it does make you deeply appreciate and grateful for small things. It really carves you out, but then you can hold more and you appreciate the things you *do* have." Eight and a half years later, it remains a subject to be tiptoed around and one that Williams hopes >

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Dress by Louis
Vuitton, \$8,760





“Every time she *smiles*, laughs,
I miss him for her,
and I miss being able
to *share her* with him”

Opposite: dress by
Versace, \$1,959

will one day cease to be an inevitable line of questioning. There's still much for her to navigate in respect of Ledger's absence, but she's found solace in friends who understand what she's going through. "I know a handful of women in similar positions, it's kind of like a club. It's a shitty club and we don't want any new members," she laughs wryly, "and all of the current members are exhausted. But oh man, oh man, it's lifesaving to have [them]."

These women help fill the void left by not having a co-parent. "There's nobody to share things with, the good and the bad," says Williams. "Every parent-teacher conference, every dance recital, every birthday, every holiday, every first day of school, every time she smiles, laughs, I miss him for her, and I miss being able to share her with him. I miss that shared parental joy. Still, the absence, it's an unacceptable thing you learn how to live with, but it doesn't mean it's OK. And the responsibility, 'What should I do about this?' That part is very lonely." Motherhood, admits the actress, is her most challenging role. How would she describe it? "Sometimes I think motherhood is really all about scheduling and cooking! It's so different at so many different stages. If you'd asked me three years ago, I would have had a very different answer. Now it's like rainbows and unicorns and sunshine, but that's just the place we happen to find ourselves in right now. It is ever-changing. I feel like parenting is reeling your kids out a little more every day. You keep [the line] taut so that they know you're there, but you grow them up so that one day they can leave you."

The other great frustration of many a sole parent? Dating. Williams sniggers, "Yeah, that's a hot topic of conversation in the single mom club! I'm not the most successful at it." The actress is currently single, following the end of a long-term relationship with writer Jonathan Safran Foer and previous romances with actor Jason Segel and filmmaker Spike Jonze. "Talk about a learning process. I think, God, what would I say about it? I feel really sensitive about it and certainly did not expect to be still dating at 36 with an 11-year-old. This is not what I imagined. I'm like a cat, I'm a very domestic creature. I just want to stay home and take care of people. But I'm also happy with myself and just because I might have a desire to be with someone, or to have a family that looks a bit more normal, that won't lead me to marry the wrong person."

Not all of her relationships since Ledger's death, she admits, were well advised. "I think at the beginning I was operating from a place of extreme loneliness and sadness and I was just reaching for whatever was nearby. As I get older, the job description [of a partner] is a little lengthier." Is it tempting to settle for less than the perfect match, particularly when the dating pool isn't as deep as for someone, say, in their twenties? "The availability! I know!" she exclaims. "My friend Busy [Philipps] and her husband Marc [Silverstein] said, 'Michelle, you're in like a blackout zone, everybody is now partnered up and you have to wait for people to start getting divorced.' Oh my fucking god. Are you kidding me? I'm just sitting around and waiting for marriages to crumble? Oh wow! *No!* Actually, I'm at a place where, if this is what it is, I'm happy with it. I'm not going to run around begging people to set me up. For a long time I thought that I needed someone to come and fix what was broken. But you know, ours may be a small family, but it's totally complete."

Last week Williams found out that she had won a much-desired part – Janis Joplin in Sean Durkin's biopic – a character she campaigned for and for which she was up against stiff competition. She still can't quite believe her success. "My expectation, because of my early experiences, is failure, and so when something good happens for me, I am dazzled by it, I am like on my knees, I am just so grateful, so happy, so excited, because it's not what I expect." All the more so because she feels the looming threat of 40, that age at which actresses are warned the work can dry up. "It does worry me," she admits.

"People talk about it like it's a sort of cliff that everybody gets pushed off! It's hard to imagine that you've reached this kind of age where suddenly the rug is pulled out from underneath your feet." It's the kind of concern that might preoccupy other actresses, but to Williams it's little more than an irritating fly buzzing at the closed window of her consciousness. Nothing can burst her bubble right now. Why? A couple of years ago, she found herself transfixed by a family parked on a pier, fishing out of the back of their truck. "I don't think it would have stood out for anybody

else," she says, "but to me it was like another world. I remember thinking: 'One day we're going to have that. One day we're going to move from OK to happy. I don't know how, but that's the next step.'"

This past summer, she says, she had a breakthrough. "I watched [Matilda] warm in the sun, in her swimsuit, get on her bicycle and smile and wave as she rode off to go meet her friends. I went back into the house and sobbed because of this incredibly simple moment – common everyday happiness. I really felt like in that moment, like wow, we've done it. Not only are we OK, she's *happy*. Life has brought us to a place that's not just surviving, but thriving."

Now, her priority is to keep Matilda in school, with as normal a routine as possible. So although she would like to do TV, it's a no-go because almost all series are filmed in LA. "If anybody has a TV show that shoots in New York they should call me," she exclaims. How about *No Sex And The City*? "No Sex And The City!" she guffaws. "That would be like my life!" ■



This page: dress
by Louis Vuitton,
\$7,300
Opposite: dress by
Dior, \$3,641



“I felt like,
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thriving”

Coat by Fendi, \$5,450



Cardigan by Balmain, \$2,910;
bikini top, \$76, and briefs, \$74,
both by NuSwim
SCAN & SHOP THESE
LOOKS WITH THE
NET-A-PORTER APP

Hair Didier Malige at Art
Partner. Makeup Pati Dubroff
at Forward Artists. Nails Elle
at Tracey Mattingly. Set
design Robert Sumrell at
Walter Schupfer Management.
Production Mary-Clancey
Pace for Hen's Tooth
Productions. Shot on location
at Glen Cove, NY on
September 8, 2016

