

Movie Review

Top-notch cast keeps romantic indie afloat

By *Betsy Pickle*, Knoxville News Sentinel Co.

The archetype of an independent film is a dark, serious story with uneven production values. To say that "At Last" goes against the tide is an understatement.



Floyd) are 1970s teenagers in Grosse Pointe, Mich., whose longtime friendship is on the cusp of becoming something more. Before they have a chance to test their relationship, Mark's family moves to New Orleans.

Years later, the adult Mark (Martin Donovan) discovers that the letters he wrote to Sara and the ones she wrote to him were intercepted by his mother, Carol (Brooke Adams). Mark is reasonably content in his marriage to uptight therapist Laura (Jessica Hecht), and he adores their children, Katherine (Amelia Turner) and Luke (Will Schierhorn), but he feels as though he has been cheated out of a precious friendship.

Mark tracks down Sara (Kelly Lynch), who's still living in Michigan. Married to Chris (Michael Arata), an alcoholic, and at odds with teen daughter Kate (Siri Baruc), Sara sees her life as fairly bleak. She fears that reconnecting with Mark will bring more pain than happiness, but she eventually agrees to fly to New Orleans to visit him.

"At Last" has many of the trappings of a Lifetime movie, but the lush cinematography by Roberto Schaefer and the honesty and perception of the dialogue set it apart. Anton and Russell wrote the script, and it's clear they took care with every word.

The film's acting is first-rate. Donovan ("Saved!") rarely gets tapped as a leading man, but he commands the spotlight with low-key appeal. Lynch, who's followed an erratic path since her impressive showing in "Drugstore Cowboy," brings a haunting hesitance to Sara.

The biggest surprise is M.C. Gainey, who plays Mark's black-sheep artist brother, Earl. The veteran tough guy is a ball of Cajun-flavored charm and spirit who lights up the screen.

"At Last" doesn't drop many bombshells, but it has its share of mini-salvos that break open the dangers of inertia, fear and silence. Anton refuses to let his characters become clichés, even when the material leans toward soap opera. "At Last" is sentimental, but never silly.

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
SOME MATERIAL MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 13
for mature thematic issues, sexual content, drug use and brief strong language

While some of its emotional terrain is rocky, "At Last" is an independent film that embraces light, love and, most of all, hope. It uses the dreamy, easygoing setting of (pre-Katrina) New Orleans to evoke a sense of romance and possibilities.

Inspired by the real-life experiences of first-time director Tom Anton and his wife, Sandi Russell, "At Last" considers whether destiny can be put back on track. The narrative occasionally feels naive, but great chemistry and a tone of sincerity make up for it.

Mark (Alex Beck) and Sara (Shannon

'At Last'

- **Storyline:** Teen sweethearts separated by distance and manipulation rekindle their friendship years later as their adult disappointment come to a head.
- **Rated:** PG-13 for mature thematic issues, sexual content, drug use and brief strong language.
- **Rating:** ★★★★★

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