

How Clea DuVall's "Happiest Season" is nudging Hollywood in a new direction

By Grace Vance

The experience of watching Hulu's "Happiest Season" brings a slew of familiar holiday rom-com tropes and even some surprising moments of ingenuity and tenderness. But I have to admit, I wasn't entirely sure about the film when I first watched it.

The premise feels like an accident waiting to happen, *at first*. Here's how it goes: Harper (played by Mackenzie Davis) invites her girlfriend Abby (Kristen Stewart) over to her parent's house for the holidays only to reveal before they arrive that her parents don't know she is gay. Abby reluctantly agrees to pretend to be her straight roommate, and predictably, things fall apart from there. What I thought might become a cringe-worthy scenario gone wrong turned out to be completely cringe-worthy, but for all the right reasons. This inopportune situation becomes the playground director Clea DuVall uses to explore the realities many queer couples face, and she even sprinkles in a delightful dose of humor à la Dan Levy's character, John, and a few self-aware closet jokes.

The story's queer focus proves to be much more fruitful ground than the genre's typical guy-meets-girl-and-they-fall-in-love route. Instead, the film positions the meet-cute part of the plot in a montage during the beginning credits. When we meet the main characters they're already deeply in love, which opens a space for more meaningful themes in the story and higher stakes for their relationship.

[Some critics](#) have noted the film's formulaic structure as a potential flaw, but I find it a clever move from DuVall, a queer woman herself, to effectively play into the predictability of the holiday rom-com genre in order to subvert it. Take the pivotal scene at the family's annual white elephant party, for instance. Tensions boil over in traditional rom-com fashion, but DuVall uses the socially conservative family's party — their barometer for success and perfection — as the backdrop for their facade to finally fall apart. That scene, and the ensuing conversation between Stewart and Levy's characters, aim for a deeper significance that most films in this genre never reach for.

"Happiest Season" is not the first of its kind to feature a same-sex couple (studio-backed rom-com "Love, Simon" debuted in 2018), but its cast of recognizable names like Stewart, Davis, Aubrey Plaza and Levy have attracted a certain level of appeal that make it the first major queer addition to the holiday genre. In earlier decades, this film might have died in limbo waiting for a distributor to pick it up; in 2020, however, it managed to break records for Hulu despite changing course from its original theatrical release through Sony. Over Thanksgiving weekend, the movie garnered more new subscribers than any other film on Hulu, and became the streaming platform's most-watched original film during its opening weekend.

This film may just represent a new sensibility in storytelling where queer creatives are encouraged to create their own stories, bringing in a host of nuance, truth and real world complexity to their LGBTQ characters that the entertainment industry previously lacked in major projects. GLAAD's [Studio Responsibility Index](#) has even reported that 2019 brought a record high percentage of LGBTQ films. Perhaps the film's commercial success will nudge Hollywood towards supporting more queer-centric projects in film and television; we are already seeing this change happen as more studio-backed films come to the market, including Universal's same-

sex rom-com from comedian Billy Eichner and Ryan Murphy's "The Prom", which is available on Netflix now.

If DuVall can crack the long-running heterosexual streak in the genre of holiday films all while bringing realistic queer characters to a wider audience, what does that say for the future of queer-centric stories? DuVall herself seems to think it's bright, saying to [Variety](#), "There's been so little visibility that for something like this to come out and be so visible and so seen and wanted to be seen by so many people — it's very humbling. It's really wild."