

## FEATURE

weekender.

KEEN  
DRAMA  
QUEENS

BY JIM KELLAR

**A** LITTLE bit of Newcastle goes a long way.

Such is the case for emerging actor and director Sophie Mathisen, whose debut feature film, *Drama*, will screen at Tower Cinemas on Thursday, November 17 as part of its Australian release through the innovative FanForce distribution model.

Mathisen's family moved to Newcastle when she was in her adolescence, attending Holy Family School, the Junction Primary and then Merewether High School.

Heavily influenced by Merewether High School teacher Janet Gillam, Mathisen pursued her interest in the arts, obtaining a bachelor of dramatic arts from the Victorian College of Art and entering the masters program at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

Mathisen, 29, wrote *Drama* over eight months in 2013 and shot the movie in Paris over a month. She directs and stars in the feature with her sister Dominique, a professional make-up artist, also co-producing.

The movie reflects independence in both tone and topic. It was made on a \$310,000 budget achieved through crowd-funding, with considerable goodwill from professional actors involved in the joint French-Australian production. The cast includes Nicole Da Silva and Tom Wren, both friends of the Mathisen sisters, Sophie's close friend and actor Jonathan Burreaux and French film star Francois Vincentelli. The soundtrack was created by Newcastle musicians Trent and Kyle Grenell, founders of The Seabellies (now working as Blitzberg).

Mathisen describes it as a "friendship romantic comedy" and says it is very indicative of her own and her sister's experiences. The film follows the character of Anna, an Australian actor living in London. She's been split up from her partner John for a year and isn't landing auditions. She travels to Paris to meet up with her best friend, Jean, who is in a relationship with his French partner.

"I was very much aware at 23 that things don't go to plan," Mathisen says, reflecting on her life and her movie. "I had a catastrophic breakup with a man much older than me. That was the relationship I had pinned my life on. You know, I grew up with *10 Things I Hate About You*. Any of the real romantic comedies told me this was the thing that would typify my life. When it didn't work out, I was shocked.

"It was strange, but very liberating.

"Realistically, the relationships we have are being sold in our early teens in the movies. They are the things that hold us back from real authentic engagements. For me, that has been the friendships. Longstanding, authentic, emotionally invested friendships."

For Mathisen, her movie does reflect the changing boundaries of a new generation, the "shift to equality".

"I am so excited now," she says. "I can't look at a romantic comedy and believe that: my girlfriends' or boyfriends' relationships pan out in so many different ways. It doesn't follow a Garry Marshall trajectory [*Pretty Woman*, *The Runaway Bride*]. No Richard Gere is going to turn up with a rose.

"That's OK, that's fine. We are far more aware and adept than we have ever been. I wanted to make a film that spoke to that. "*Dating the Enemy*" (Claudia Karvan, Guy



**POWER OF SISTERHOOD:** Sophie and Dominique Mathisen, co-producers of *Drama*, a romantic friendship movie releasing nationally on November 17.

Pearce) did that for me in the '90s. It's OK to be single, OK not to have your shit together. I really wanted to make something that said women, or men, could think 'I'm a f---ing mess but I'm still nailing it'."

*Drama* has had a good run on the festival circuit in Europe and the US, obtaining screenings in London, Chicago, Portland and New York. Despite their best efforts, the Mathisens were unable to attract any Australian government funding.

Yet, they have pushed ahead, eventually making an agreement with FanForce, a distribution company that allows a movie to be released simultaneously online (\$5 download on iTunes and Google Play) and in cinemas.

While the Mathisens realise they may never make back their investment, or that it may take several years to pay back their supporters, they also know it's an investment in their careers and those of their cast and crew, which they were committed to making at least 50 percent female.

"The biggest hope for me, I know it sounds altruistic, the biggest hope is that it will inspire other production companies to take on women. We are absolute nobodies. But for us, it is an important thing that it becomes a wave or a movement. That is the greatest thing we can hope for. We judge women for their investment and what they are willing to sacrifice."

*Drama* screens at Tower Cinemas on November 17.

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