

Mary Elizabeth Winstead is Emotionally Wrecked in ‘Smashed’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Young Drunks in Love” could be the subtitle of the new film “Smashed,’ or maybe “Recovery Can’t Recover All.” Regardless, Mary Elizabeth Winstead gives a career-defining performance as a young adult facing up to that adulthood, and leaving behind everything she has known for a life that’s healthier, but less familiar.

It’s rare that alcoholism is tackled at this level in the twentysomething generation. Given the party lifestyle that America loves to perpetuate, there is bound to be difficulties for those who can’t grasp when the party is over for them. This is a honest appraisal of such a situation, as Winstead goes through the phases of recovery as a fleshed-out human being, and uses her character’s strengths and weaknesses in confronting the backlash that recovering from alcoholism has on her marriage and life. It’s powerful stuff, but it also has humor, appropriate emotion, awkwardness and an expressive heart.

Kate Hannah (Winstead) is a school teacher by day, and co-dependent by night. Her and her husband Charlie (Aaron Paul) are unapologetic drunks, usually beginning their binges right after that last bell. Kate especially is in a death spiral, as she is shown driving drunk, trying crack cocaine and getting sick in front of her students. The illness also starts a series of lies, and Kate can’t help but self-reflect on what this life is doing to her.



She is aided on this reflective journey by a co-worker named Dave (Nick Offerman), who expresses his own recovery to her, and offers to take

her to an AA meeting. She immediately adapts to the atmosphere, even asking Jenny (Octavia Spencer) to be her sponsor. This is the beginning of a true shift in Kate's life. She no longer participates with Charlie in binge drinking, and she forces herself into a awkward reunion with her mother (Mary Kay Place). She even confronts the lie she told to cover up the incident with her class, by coming clean to Principal Barnes (Megan Mullally). It's a long way to go to where she needs to be.

Winstead is astounding, and is sure to be remembered during awards season. She plays the role with subtlety, never venturing over-the-top with the drunkenness, but effectively communicating the destructive nature of it. Sometimes outside observers have the impression that once a person starts Alcoholic Anonymous, their problems are solved. The film makes a good point that basically sobriety is a condition in which serious alcoholics can begin to face their other demons. Scenes like the mother visit were so telling, yet didn't flash a big neon sign saying "oh, so this is where it starts." Winstead becomes a person in reality after the pledge, and positions her character – with writer/director James Ponsoldt – to face life rather than retreat from it.

The supporting cast is top drawer as well. Aaron Paul is an open wound as Kate's husband Charlie, struggling to understand the changes in his wife while he ignores his own contributions to the life. As a performer, he interprets the complex emotions of being somewhat left behind, it's a poignant counterweight to Kate's mission. Nick Offerman ("Parks and Recreation") is perfect as Dave, wrapped around his own agenda, but rallying when Kate really needs him. Octavia Spencer adds depth to the sponsor role where it could have been a throwaway. We also see another side to Megan Mullally (Offerman's real-life wife, known mostly for Karen on "Will & Grace"). She plays Principal Barnes as willing to help, but also prickly as she feels betrayed.

[Although in a HollywoodChicago.com interview](#), [14] director James Ponsoldt was quick to say the film wasn't about alcoholism per se, there is still a resonance regarding the disease that because it is set within the age group in their late twenties. It is often touted as the generation that refuses to grow up, prolonging adolescent and collegiate party attitudes well into their adult years. Kate does make a transition, and it takes recovery from addiction to do it. The cause and path of that recovery can't help but be noted.



Kate is Sponsored by Jenny (Octavia Spencer) in 'Smashed'
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic

The effect on the relationship is another major theme. Roughly 8 out of 10 marriages fail once one of the couple starts recovery and the other doesn't. Communication breaks down severely, and lifestyles split apart, and that is succinctly portrayed in Kate and Charlie's story. Winstead is also an attractive actress, striking actually, and all the ugliness that she goes through is a counterpoint to that blooming youth. It makes the transition all that more vital and authentic.

Like Jack Lemmon and Lee Remick in "Days of Wine and Roses" two generations earlier, Mary Elizabeth Winstead and Aaron Paul create the notion of recovery and its ramifications. In the perspective of the post-millennial generation of now, it becomes more like going from being a child to taking responsibility as an adult.

"Smashed" has a limited release in Chicago on October 19th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Aaron Paul, Octavia Spencer, Nick Offerman, Megan Mullally and Mary Kay Place. Written and directed by James Ponsoldt. Rated "R"



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