

Adrienne Shelly's breakthrough was bittersweet

by Norma Meyer

At the charming end of "Waitress," Keri Russell and her on-screen toddler walk off into the proverbial sunset. But first, the 22-month-old real-life daughter of the film's writer-director and co-star, Adrienne Shelly, softly uttered an unscripted line to her true parent on the set: "Bye, Mommy."

It is a scene that is now heart-wrenching to watch given the tragic back story.

Adrienne Shelly Last Nov. 1, just a day after taking her only child Sophie trick-or-treating and with her quirky comedy about maternal love complete, Shelly, 40, was found hanging from a bedsheet tied to a shower curtain rod in her New York office-apartment.

What was initially thought to be suicide turned into a murder investigation. Police said a 19-year-old construction worker who was renovating the apartment below told them that he struck the petite filmmaker after they had argued about noise. Thinking Shelly was dead, he allegedly took a sheet off the bed, tied it around her neck and dragged her to the bathroom, where he strung her up to make it look as if she took her own life. Shelly's husband of five years, Andy Ostroy, a marketing-executive, discovered the body.

"It's very difficult to watch the movie," said Cheryl Hines, who plays a sassy waitress, Becky. "It fills my heart when she comes on the screen. And at the same time, I can't get through the film without getting highly emotional about her loss.

"Adrienne wrote and directed and starred in this movie. She really picked every color, every word, every costume, every prop. She knew exactly what she wanted, and she really made sure she got it."

The pall of her death is a sharp contrast to the uplifting screwball tale in which Shelly plays Dawn, a mousey strawberry-blond who wears thick-rimmed glasses and is one of three waitress pals at a small-town Southern

diner. At the center of the story is Jenna (Russell), a depressed pie-making whiz trapped in a bad marriage to a controlling jerk, Earl (Jeremy Sisto). When Jenna finds out she's pregnant, she's horrified and promptly whips up aptly named confections, such as I Don't Want Earl's Baby Pie, and Baby Screaming Its Head Off in the Middle of the Night and Ruining My Life Pie.

Shelly didn't get to walk the red carpet at the movie's New York premiere or tout her picture in front of the media. She's left to speak in a clip made by an on-set videographer.

"I wrote 'Waitress' when I was about eight months pregnant with Sophie, and I was really scared about having a baby," she said. "I just couldn't imagine what my life was going to be after I had a baby. I thought it was going to change so drastically (that) I wasn't even going to recognize myself anymore."

A TURNING POINT

What makes the movie's release - and positive critical reviews - all the more bittersweet is that it was a turning point in Shelly's long career.

An indie fave, the New York native acted in some 20 films, including "The Unbelievable Truth" (1989); "Trust" (1990); and "Factotum" (2005). In the late '90s, she wrote and directed her first two features, "Sudden Manhattan," in which she also played the lead, and "I'll Take You There," starring Ally Sheedy. Neither fared well. The latter went straight to DVD.

Shelly died just days before she would have learned that "Waitress" had been accepted into the Sundance Film Festival. Within hours of its being shown at the festival in January, Fox Searchlight Pictures bought the movie for nearly \$4 million.

"Waitress" producer Michael Roiff chatted with Shelly on the phone the night before she was slain. "We were talking about Sundance and sort of hoping and dreaming a bit and wondering if we ought to send some pie over there so (the entry judges) didn't have to make a decision on an empty stomach."

Roiff, whose background is in local theater, also was excited because "Waitress" was the first feature he produced. The movie shot for 20 days in Canyon Country north of Los Angeles, although with starts and stops the project took two years to get made. Roiff says he and Shelly were so thrilled that TV icon Andy Griffith was in the cast (he plays curmudgeonly diner owner Joe), they'd whistle the theme song from "The Andy Griffith Show" on and off the set.

Shelly conjured up all the recipes for the whimsical pies, including the Earl Murders Me Because I'm Having an Affair Pie, named for Jenna's fling with her married OB-GYN (Nathan Fillion). Smash blackberries and raspberries into a chocolate crust for that dessert.

"Adrienne had this endless supply of pies in her head," Roiff said.

A pastry chef concocted most of the 200 pies used for the film, but Shelly revamped, oversaw and occasionally swapped out creations for new ideas.

Once, Roiff recalls, he and a prop person dashed off to the market because Shelly decided she wanted Earl to eat a spaghetti pie. "She's yelling after me, 'Don't forget the parmesan.'"

He also remembers how, after the barely 5-foot-2 Shelly did a scene in a wedding gown, she marched over to a camera monitor in full bridal regalia and began giving the next set of orders to the crew. "It was quite a sight."

PROLIFIC WRITER

Reid Rosefelt, a friend who directed Shelly in the short film "Tiger: His Rise & Fall," says it took her about two weeks to pen "Waitress" after it percolated in her head. He said she was always working on a script.

"She had a routine," Rosefelt said.

Although she resided elsewhere in Manhattan, Rosefelt said, Shelly kept the Greenwich Village apartment she lived in when she was single as an office where she could quietly write. Ostroy dropped her off there the morning of Nov. 1.

Not long afterward, Shelly apparently left the fourth-floor apartment to complain about construction racket in the unit directly below. Worker Diego Pillco later told investigators that he had a heated argument with Shelly and followed her back to her apartment. According to court documents, Pillco said he punched Shelly in the face and pushed her after she hit him back. She fell backward and he claimed that he panicked after she struck her head on a table and appeared to be dead.

Pillco "then got a sheet which was on the bed and tied it around her neck and dragged her by the other end of the sheet from the hallway to the bathroom," the court documents state. He allegedly climbed on the toilet, pulled her up and knotted the sheet to the shower rod - the way, he said, he had tied up pigs on a farm in his native Ecuador.

Initially, police considered the death a probable suicide. But friends and family members refused to believe the devoted mother of a little girl would kill herself. After further investigation, detectives discovered sneaker prints in the bathroom and they led them to Pillco. He is in jail and awaiting trial, accused of second-degree murder.

Following his wife's death, Ostroy established The Adrienne Shelly Foundation, which gives grants and scholarships to help other women filmmakers achieve their dreams.

If only Shelly could have known her movie would open nationwide in theaters on Mother's Day weekend. "To me, that's the hardest thing on a number of levels," Roiff said. "Because she'd just be over the moon."

In the video clip, Shelly called what would be her third and final film "a love letter to my baby."

Little Sophie plays the daughter of the changed Jenna at the end of the movie. At one point, Jenna sings to the tot a lullaby that Shelly wrote. In another scene, Shelly, as Dawn, is seen holding Sophie.

"We were desperately trying to figure out how to keep Sophie happy without not necessarily being around Mom, because Mom's not playing her mom in those scenes," Roiff said.

Shelly had long envisioned the warm-hearted closing, where Jenna and her daughter go down a road. But when it came time to shoot, Sophie, like most toddlers, preferred to be with her real mom.

"It was a challenge to get her daughter in Keri's arms and walk away because she just wanted to be with Adrienne," Hines recalled.

Shelly eventually got the shot, although her daughter blurted out that tiny good-bye.

"I hope that one day we'll get to show the movie to Sophie," Roiff said."And she'll understand how wonderful her mother was."

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