

Q&A: Katie Leclerc on new Hallmark film, how 'Countdown to Christmas' brings joy

BEHIND THE SCREENS WITH JOSHUA MALONI
Making a pie isn't easy. They say it's a science but, even when the formula seems sound, there's no guarantee the apples will stay soft while the crust crisps. I mean, if the hot air really is circulating inside the oven, then why is it that the bottom always takes longer than the top? Baking is hard work. But so is acting.

Still, Katie Leclerc doesn't seem to mind either job.

It's for that reason she took time to chat about her new film, "Letters to Santa," even as she had 12 – count them 12 – pies to make ahead of Thanksgiving.

"I go to my sister's house in Utah for Thanksgiving. And my nephew insists on a pie for every person at Thanksgiving," Leclerc said in a phone interview. "I will be making pies – and so many of them. I think there's 12 people at this year's Thanksgiving, so I'm going to be covered in flour and sugar and butter."

"I'm a baker, so I wouldn't have it any other way."

As Daphne Vasquez on ABC Family's "Switched at Birth," Leclerc not only made a name for herself as an actor, but brought deaf culture to the forefront of the TV-viewing public.

Since then, she has carved out a place amongst the top made-for-television romantic dramedy performers, starring in films including "Christmas a la Mode" and "Cloudy with a Chance of Love." Leclerc also has diversified her on-screen portfolio by taking on psychological thrillers including "A Bride's Revenge" and appearing in hit series "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," "Community," "The Big Bang Theory" and "NCIS."

Leclerc recently teamed with the Hallmark Channel to make "Letters to Santa." She stars alongside Rafael de la Fuente and child actors Taylor Pezza and Kellen Raffaello in a film the network describes thusly: "When young siblings receive a magic pen from Santa that appears to be granting wishes, they request a Christmas gift they want more than anything – for their separated parents to reunite."

It was important to take a break from pie prep to promote this project, Leclerc explained, because Hallmark's "Countdown to Christmas" is needed now more than ever.

"Joy comes to mind, honestly. I feel like it just brings such a big smile to people's faces," she said. "A few years ago, there used to be a bit of a cheese factor, perhaps, and what I have to say about that is thank God! Because I love the cheese, and I really think it makes people joyful. I really think it makes people happy."

"And I think more and more, right now, people are embracing that sort of joyfulness. I think we need it more and more. It's a place where Christmas is not always easy, but it is always rewarding. The character goes through (something and), hopefully, there's a problem. That's what making stories is: that's what making movies is. So, they have to get through it, but you kind of know on the other side that peace of mind. And while you're watching it, you're going to feel good; and it's warm and peaceful and joyful."

"Letters to Santa" is re-airing throughout the holiday season on Hallmark, and streaming on Peacock. Leclerc shared more in this edited Q&A.

Q: What did you like about this particular film? What was the appeal to you in taking on this role?

Katie Leclerc: This story is about two people who are experiencing their life. They're going through real-



"Letters to Santa" (Crown Media key art)

everybody was so talented, and it made it so fun to be on screen together, and just the off-screen was even that much more fun on top of all of it.

We had a really great time onset as becoming a family.

Q: I want to go back to something that you mentioned at the start of our interview. You mentioned about how these films are a source of joy, and certainly that's the case for the audience. But to create that joy takes a lot of work.

Your job, obviously, is awesome. But as much as we enjoy your work, it's really hard. Can you speak to that part of it?

Katie Leclerc: Yeah, thank you for the opportunity to speak about that.

Oh, my gosh, I think you're right, too, especially with the strikes. Thank goodness they're over. I was worried that I wasn't going to be able to promote our amazing film.

I think that it is glamorous. I'm not going to lie and say that it's not, right? Like, that's part of the appeal. Part of the reason that I love doing it so much, and I have so much fun doing it.

It can feel that way. There's times where it feels like, "Man, this is a slog." But, really, for the most part, like I don't want to make it seem that way, because I love my job. I love my job so much that I'm willing to, you know, in the early part of my career, not know where my rent money was going to come from while I worked my coffee shop job.

I love this business, and I love storytelling so much that there's nothing else that I could do.

I thought, when I was growing up, I wanted to be in the WNBA. But I was too short; like, that's not going to be what it is. So, what else can I do? What else do I care so deeply for that I'm willing to sacrifice time with my family, because I'm working on a role, or I have to cut back vacation. The trope in Hollywood is the fastest way to book a roll is to book a flight. You book a trip and you're going to get a job that makes it so that you've got to cancel your plans on a whim, because you love storytelling that much.

I'm very grateful that we are back to work now.

I think that the only way that it turns out so well if it is everybody is working that hard on it, right? The props look outstanding. The wardrobe looks incredible. The sound is amazing and crisp and clear. And my gosh, if I'm not in focus and the camera department isn't doing their job, then what's the point of any of it? You know what I mean?

My favorite thing about this business is that it takes so many people to get it right. And you get to be part of a small little community along the way.

I just love it, really. I love doing what we get to do. The hours are long – and some projects take a little bit of your soul with you, but that's kind of the beauty of it, too.

Q: I'm guessing, at 5 feet, 4 inches – which is what IMDb has you pegged at – that probably in the WNBA you wouldn't have made as much of an impact.

Katie Leclerc: (Laughs) The closest I got, my character on "Switched at Birth" got to play a whole lot of basketball, because I told the showrunner that I can play basketball. So, she wrote it into the show. So, I got to live out a little bit of that star power, basketball fantasy life.

life problems. They're separated, on the verge of divorce. They're trying to figure it out. But here's the thing: These two characters really want to be together, from the very beginning of this movie. It's not your typical Hallmark movie where it's sort of like, "Oh, are they going to get together or aren't they going to get together?" These characters are together, they want to be together, and just like real life, they have to figure out how to make that work and how to make that happen.

Sometimes family can be complicated, but the one thing that you know, at the end of the day, is that you all love each other. So, this particular story is relatable in that relationships are hard. The mom and the dad want to be together, and they just have to figure out how to make it work.

Q: I know that, for these types of films, usually they're relatively short shoots, as far as the number of days. So, what is the key to not only finding your character, but developing chemistry – not just with your co-lead, but in this case with the kids, as well? What is the key to developing and building that in such a short period of time?

Katie Leclerc: I think that John Stimpson, our director, is brilliant as a human being and a person and a director. He creates a sense of family from the moment that you step on the set.

You had mentioned my co-lead and Rafael: I instantly fell in love with Rafael. We met up in Los Angeles before going out to Worcester, Massachusetts, where we filmed, and where John Stimpson, our director, is from. From the first time I met him, I was like, "Ooh, this is going to be just a really fun shoot." And I was really looking forward to the experience because of that, and because of meeting Rafael ahead of time.

And then what happened is we were there and we all went to the table read. And we all sat down at the table read. It's the first time that you're really hearing the story out loud, and you see the kids start to perform. And after that, I looked at Rafael – who's an incredible actor and has been part of really great projects – and you know when good is good, and you know when good is great – and I looked at Rafael and I'm like, "This is going to be great." I really believe that.

The performances are outstanding, even for the little kids, and just the whole environment – it really felt like we gelled together, we bonded together, right away.

I think that John is the main reason for that. But then I just think that ev-

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