

‘It’s like nothing will ever be whole again’

Michelle Williams talks candidly to **Tim Teeman** about grief, life after Heath Ledger, her mania for cleaning — and her new film

Michelle Williams apologises for her pancake make-up: it’s “so not” her but she has come from a chatshow where it was plastered on. The real her is in the feathery elfin crop and the grannyish thick, woollen cardigan that she wears, and which she picks at nervously as she talks about grief, love and why she is so relentlessly hard on herself as a parent and an actor.

The 30-year-old former *Dawson’s Creek* star-turned-indie-darling, best known for playing emotionally enigmatic outsiders, lives in a commune in Brooklyn with her daughter, mother and sister and a “shifting population” of others. She is wary of those curious to know about her life three years on from the death, caused by an accidental overdose of prescription drugs, of Heath Ledger, her former partner and the father of her five-year-old daughter, Matilda. “Talking to me isn’t completely uncomplicated,” she says. “It is in my nature to be honest, it’s what I do in my work, my life and my parenting. But truth is never one thing. It shifts, it’s wrapped in disguises.”

I am told that she will not talk about Ledger but, haltingly and with eloquence, she does: from “the mud” of grief to the possibility of finding love again. Williams’s image may be tinged by tragedy, an idea accentuated by her tormented roles (in films such as *Brokeback Mountain*, on which she met Ledger; *Wendy and Lucy*; and even *Dawson’s Creek*), but a more accurate description of this intelligent and

relentlessly self-interrogating actress might be that supplied by Ryan Gosling, her co-star in her latest, and possibly best, movie, *Blue Valentine*: she is, he said, “Brigitte Bardot meets Clint Eastwood, a sexy cowboy”.

If your relationship is in trouble — actually if you are even contemplating having a relationship — think carefully before seeing *Blue Valentine*. This ultimate anti-dating film features Williams and Gosling as Cindy and Dean, whose relationship we follow on the twin-tracks of past, when they first meet, and present, six years later, teetering on the edge of break-up and breakdown: Williams skilfully embodies first the young romantic and later the embittered partner.

It is a startling, accomplished performance: Williams has already received a Golden Globe Best Actress nomination and would entirely merit an Oscar nomination (she last scored Oscar, Golden Globe and Bafta nominations for Best Supporting Actress for *Brokeback*). Derek Cianfrance’s clever, counterintuitive film does not reveal why Cindy and Dean are in such a mess, or ply us with easy melodrama, but sketches the raw terrain of a relationship’s descent from tenderness to snarling mutual disdain.

Williams denies rumours that she and Gosling had a relationship off camera. However, they lived in their alter-egos “house” and went grocery shopping together. The film’s improvisational heart is clear in the naturalism of their performances. “When I dreamt of being an actor, as a teenager reading books about Marlon Brando and James Dean and ‘the Method’, and all that embarrassing ‘actor’ stuff,” Williams says, “I hoped that one day I would be given the liberty to do the same, and now I have. We never did lines, everything was done straight on to camera. I hold myself to a high standard; I’m hard on myself for better, for worse. I always ask for another take.”

Of filming the last part of the film, the breakdown, Williams says: “I would count the hours until I could get in the car and drive away, wash it off, my head out of the window, screaming like a dog. The only thing that could calm me was listening to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs because it was female and aggressive.”

She “blocked out” filming one sex/near-rape scene. “It wasn’t my



favourite way to spend the day, but I wanted to make it the best it can be. Every scene had its hurdles and challenges to overcome.”

Despite fleeting fancies for being a truck driver or a fly fisherman, Williams told her parents at the age of 9 that she wanted to act. Theatre roles in *Annie* and *The Sound of Music* followed and by her early teens she was attending film and TV auditions.

At 15 she decided to legally emancipate herself from her parents, which, I say, seems an aggressive, unusual thing to do. “What teenager doesn’t want total autonomy if they have the chance?” Williams reasons, smiling. “I got the idea from reading about it in the papers. At the time there were a lot of kids in Hollywood and in the news doing the same thing.”

Is she close to her parents today? Williams pauses, looks stricken. Her dad, Larry, a stock and commodities trader? “Er,” she says, with a frozen look that implies “No”. However, her mother, Carla, lives with her “and is a

big part of my life. And my sister, who I didn’t establish a relationship with when we were younger, lives with me too so it’s all come around.” (By a commune, she clarifies, she means “a few people living in the same house rather than having our own religion. We take in strangers on good recommendation.”)

“I’m hard on myself. Everything in my life is opened out, checked for deformities and sewn back up

After some small TV roles, her part in *Dawson’s Creek* as Jen, the rebellious outsider, made her name. “My God, it was a blessing in so many ways and continues to be,” she says of the teen drama, which ran from 1998 to 2003. “It lifted me out of Los Angeles and placed me until I was 22 in a sleepy Southern town [Wilmington, North Carolina, where the series was filmed]. It was the best acting class, learning to hit your mark, absorb your lines. I feel indebted to it and if there was ever a reunion show, sign me up.”

Williams fell in love with Ledger on the set of *Brokeback Mountain* a year later. They had separated by the time of his death. On the American current

affairs show *Nightline* in December Williams said that she couldn’t find a “meaning” in his death, adding that she missed the year after his passing because “it didn’t seem unlikely he would walk through a door or appear from behind a bush”.

Williams is cautious of questions about Ledger. “I don’t want to lose control in too public a way,” she says. I ask if love is important to her. “Sure, but when you’ve had it, you always, in a way, have it,” she says.

She dated, then split from the director Spike Jonze in 2008. Is she happy to be on her own, or would she like to be in a relationship again? “I am single but either is fine with me,” she says. “I’m used to being single.”

Would she like to be with someone? She sighs, smiles. “Yes, I would.” I ask if her feeling that Ledger was “the one” has stopped her finding someone else. She nods vigorously. “Yes, that’s the tough one,” she says. “It’s like nothing will ever be that whole again. You just want impossible things. I’ve had to get

down on my hands and knees and sift through the muck and mud, and try to find little pearls, little nuggets of things that make sense.”

Does she think about her own mortality, especially in light of Ledger’s death? “Sure, doesn’t everybody? We all live in the constant denial of death.” She says that friends supported her “and I feel like I’ve always had work, that’s been the place I can go, sometimes physically just to get out of the house and also emotionally”.

Her films have included Todd Haynes’s *I’m Not There*, in which she played an Edie Sedgwick-like figure, and Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island* plus a brace of under-the-radar independent movies. “I got to a point where I couldn’t use work as a refuge and so I learnt,” she laughs, “to fall in love with taking time off.”

“Nothing goes by in my life without being opened out, turned over, checked for deformities and sewn back up. I’m hard on myself, not just as an actress.” How? “Everything. I’m learning to



Main picture, Michelle Williams in *Blue Valentine*; above, with co-star Ryan Gosling; below, at the film’s premiere; left, with Heath Ledger



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little girl who is the spitting image of her father. All that I can cling to is his presence inside her that reveals itself every day. His family and I watch Matilda as she whispers to trees, hugs animals, and takes steps two at a time, and we know that he is with us still. She will be brought up with the best memories of him.”

Williams first moved to Brooklyn with Ledger in 2005 “to have a garden”. Then many of her friends moved there: “I’m only a walk away from a home-cooked meal and a shoulder.”

The paparazzi annoy her. “I know they’re there, that’s why I usually have such a sour look on my face. I would ask them to keep their distance and not enter my daughter’s sphere.”

Her nervousness today, the way she looks in the paparazzi photos, her standout roles: is she as tormented as all these conspire to imply? “There’s a tendency to look at my life and my work and mix up the two. Not all of my work has been like that: *Synecdoche, New York* wasn’t.”

Take this Waltz, a forthcoming film with Seth Rogen, is lighter, she adds; and in *Meek’s Cutoff*, a western nominated for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, “my character isn’t tormented, just hungry”, Williams says. Most anticipated is *My Week With Marilyn*, about the British writer and film-maker Colin Clark’s week with Marilyn Monroe, played by Williams. “It was fun, but a backbreaker,” she says. “I like working at the edge of my own ability pretty intensely, whether that’s actually at the edge, sometimes hanging on to the edge, sometimes learning to become the edge. There’s this Flaubert quote that I love: ‘Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work.’ I keep that in my pocket.”

Williams refuses to get worked up about the Golden Globes and Oscars, shrugging goofily at their mention. As far as future ambitions go, she says she’d like to learn to play the cello. So is she happier than people think? “I have a lot to be profoundly grateful for. I am going home to a house of seven dear friends, and my daughter is happy, healthy and thriving.” So we should jettison the tormented image of her? Williams smiles mischievously. “Well, you’ve got to laugh to keep ‘em crying.”

Blue Valentine is released on Friday