

Review: *From Straight A's to XXX*

by Frankie Piccione

Warning: The following contains minor spoilers.

For a telefilm about a porn star, *From Straight A's to XXX* does an impressive job of highlighting the heart of the character, rather than the sex appeal. What could have easily been a trashy, raunchy, and cliché Lifetime Original Movie is actually a touching story about a young girl who makes an unusual choice: to work in the adult film industry to pay for her college tuition.

Fearful of a life of debt caused by student loans, woman studies and sociology major Miriam Weeks disguises herself as Belle Knox, a name derived from both *Beauty and the Beast* and real-life Amanda Knox, and secretly lives the double life of Duke University freshman/porn star. Since there are so many porn stars in the world, Miriam believes that no one on campus will find out and she'll be able to keep the truth from her conservative, Catholic family. But when a male classmate outs her, Miriam becomes subject to intense bullying by her peers, accompanied by numerous death threats. However, Miriam uses her newfound attention to defend her choices and puts her already impressive debate skills to the test by taking a stance on feminism and self-empowerment, even winding up on CNN and *The View*.

Released in 2017, *From Straight A's to XXX* draws on the true story of the real Miriam Weeks, who was outed as Belle Knox in 2014. Haley Pullos, who portrays the fictional version of Miriam, displays a stunning array of raw emotion, making the character feel completely relatable from her first moment on screen to her last. She even looks like the real Weeks. Pullos's performance is so good, in fact, that I found myself backing her crazy plan instead of saying, "Just take out the loan, dummy!"

Sasha Clements gives an excellent performance as Jolie, Miriam's on-campus best friend, reminding us that Miriam has one place to turn in a world where she constantly struggles for support. Clements does an exceptional job of making Jolie feel like a strong girl who actually cares about Miriam, standing by her friend no matter what and taking offense when Miriam claims that none of the girls at Duke University are on her side.

The footage from CNN and *The View* is pulled from Weeks's actual interviews in 2014, which is a nice touch. Fortunately, the film never feels like it has an agenda nor does it seem like Screenwriter Anne-Marie Hess is trying to persuade people's opinions of pornography. It is the story of a girl who made a choice, and nothing more. Miriam doesn't bash religion or other people's opinions in order to express her own, which demonstrates the strength of her debate skills. Conservative and Catholic lifestyles are not viewed in a negative light, and Miriam's parents are portrayed as loving when they find out how their daughter is paying for school. They're hurt and not happy about it, but they never stop loving their daughter.

Truly, the film's strongest component is its teleplay and its ability to handle its subject with tact. I was waiting for Miriam's seemingly respectable manager to turn on her, but he remains professional throughout the story. I was also thinking that once Miriam was outed as Belle, every guy in school would try to sleep with her just because "that's what guys do on television," but Director Vanessa Parise never stoops to such stereotypical levels, making the world feel authentic and this production feel fresh and original.