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16 to Life

A Waterdog Films presentation. Produced by Becky Smith, Denise Mann. Executive producer, Terry Trimpe. Co-executive producer, Vaughn Halyard. Directed, written by Becky Smith.

With: Hallee Hirsch, Theresa Russell, Mandy Musgrave, Will Rothhaar, Shiloh Fernandez, Emily Foxler, Nicholas Downs, Jaime Gomez, Carson Kressley, Emily Foxler, Pamela Dunlap, Ryan Gourley.

By [DENNIS HARVEY](#)

Charting 24 hours in a small-town adolescent girl's busy/bleak summer break, Becky Smith's "16 to Life" starts out awfully arch, as if it had studied "Juno" at length and decided it wasn't nearly smartypants enough. But writer-director Becky Smith's slick debut feature gradually relaxes, scoring some poignant as well as more gently comic points. Lacking major star power or marketing muscle, this eventually endearing seriocomedy looks to be a minor player in self-distributed theatrical release starting Sept. 3. But cable and home-format sales look promising; ditto principal contributors' calling-card benefits.

Kate (Hallee Hirsch, who won a jury acting prize at the 2009 Method Fest, where the pic also nabbed the audience award) is the never-been-kissed teen protag in an Iowa resort town that's economically depressed except during the summer tourist season. Stuck working at the local fast-food stand/beauty parlor on her birthday, she plays matchmaker to others while fretting over her own lack of romantic prospects. (Though naturally, there is a dreamboat waiting in the wings, played by Will Rothhaar.)

Major players include co-workers of the slutty (Mandy Musgrave) and stoner-ish (Shiloh Fernandez) variety; a foxy paraplegic customer (Jaime Gomez) and the biz owner (Theresa Russell), the paraplegic's past and possibly future g.f. Russell at one point delivers a quite respectable rendition of "Taking a Chance on Love," and looks as if 10 rather than 30 years had passed since "Bad Timing."

Smith's first feature (following extensive TV work) starts out with dual snarky voiceover narrators, but mercifully shifts toward less cartoonish character dramedy to charming effect. Perfs are engaging down the line, packaging modest but sharp.

Camera (color, HD), Quyen Tran; editor, Eleanor Infante; music, H. Scott Salinas; music supervisor, Cathi Black; production designer, Eva Andry; art director, Paul Steffensen; costume designer, Mia Gyzander; sound, Nancy Pope; supervising sound editors, David Raines, Beth Stemer; re-recording mixers, Jim Fitzpatrick, Raines; assistant director, Frank Caridi; casting, Sunday Boling, Meg Norman. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, Aug. 19, 2010. (In 2009 Method Fest.) Running time: 90 MIN.

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