

Before
they were
famous

Michelle Williams

She's winning praise for her new role as Marilyn Monroe, but the ex-Dawson's Creek star's no stranger to real-life drama too

'I divorced my parents'

It was one of the worst things that could happen to any woman - and it nearly crushed actress Michelle Williams. When her former fiancé Heath Ledger was found dead after a suspected drugs overdose in January 2008, she was left to bring up their daughter Matilda, now six, alone.

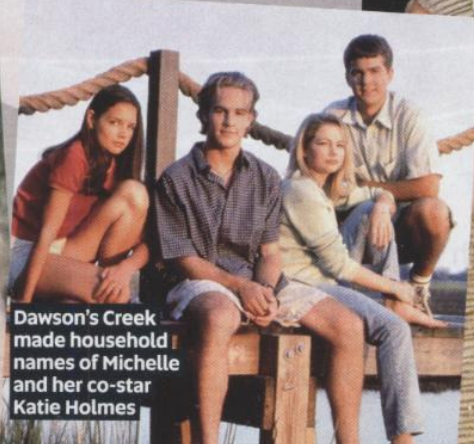
Michelle, 31, took a year off and admits her loss was so great that she almost quit acting. 'What happened changed my relationship with the world,' she says. 'I wasn't sure if acting was the right place for me. Or if I was

any good or liked what I was doing anymore.' But instead of admitting defeat, she's come back stronger and is currently receiving rave reviews and being talked of as an Oscar contender for her role in the new film *My Week With Marilyn*.

It's a measure of the steely determination Michelle's shown from a young age. She was born in the city of Kalispell, Montana, in September 1980. Her dad Larry was a commodities trader, an author and a Republican

TURN FOR MORE ➡

Aw! Michelle was always comfortable in front of cameras



Dawson's Creek made household names of Michelle and her co-star Katie Holmes

'I WASN'T
SURE IF
ACTING
WAS
FOR ME'

Before they were famous

Michelle Williams

candidate for the US senate, while her mum Carla was an office worker. Michelle has three elder half-siblings – Jason, Kelley and Sara – from Larry’s first marriage, and a younger sister Paige, 27.

As a youngster, Michelle fiercely guarded her independence. ‘I was really secretive with my parents. I found that by keeping to myself I got on OK,’ she’s admitted. She also harboured a slightly unusual ambition. ‘I wanted to be a boxer,’ she says. ‘I don’t know why, but I wanted to fight Mike Tyson.’

When Michelle was nine, Larry moved the family to San Diego, California. ‘My father’s a treasure hunter and had many jobs,’ she explains. ‘He fostered a sense of independence in all of us.’ She was enrolled at the prestigious Santa Fe Christian School and her desire to become a boxer was replaced by a longing to act. ‘That’s what I want to do for the rest of my life,’ she told her mum after she’d been to see a youth theatre production.

She took acting lessons at the nearby Christian Youth Theater, appearing on stage in *Annie* and *The Sound Of Music*. By the age of 13, she’d even starred in an episode of *Baywatch*.

Bullied by classmates for being

different, she was home-schooled by her mum from the age of 14, when she also landed her first movie role in the 1994 remake of *Lassie*. The following year, having graduated from school early, she made a ruthlessly ambitious decision.

To enable herself to evade child labour laws, she filed for legal emancipation from her parents. ‘It’s basically like divorcing them,’ Michelle says. ‘You have to prove you’re emotionally and financially stable and independent.’

I KEPT SECRETS FROM MY FOLKS

Michelle insists that she was only doing what others her age wanted to do. ‘What teenager doesn’t want total autonomy if they have the chance?’ she asks. ‘It’s just that not a lot of parents let them. My father was supportive of it, my mother not so much.’

Nonetheless, she got her way.

When her parents divorced shortly afterwards, she wasn’t particularly surprised. ‘I think every kid in that situation can sense the whispers from behind closed doors,’ she’s revealed.



Michelle says Matilda, now six, is Heath’s legacy

Daily reminder

After Heath’s death, Michelle said of Matilda: ‘I’m the mother of the most beautiful girl, who’s the spitting image of her dad. All I can cling to is his presence inside her that reveals itself to us every day.’

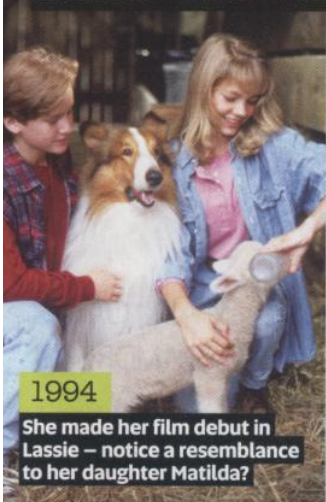
Michelle and Heath with Matilda in 2006, a year before their split

Michelle moved to Burbank, LA, and found regular work in adverts and TV series such as the sitcom *Home Improvement* in 1995 and as Michelle Pfeiffer’s daughter in 1997 film *A Thousand Acres*. But it wasn’t until 1998, at the age of 17, that she got her big break when she was cast as troublemaker Jen Lindley in teen drama series *Dawson’s Creek*.

Before long, she was appearing alongside some of Hollywood’s biggest stars in what’s blossomed into a sparkling career – she even nabbed an Oscar nod for Best Supporting Actress (and boyfriend Heath) after landing a role in 2005 movie *Brokeback Mountain*. Still, given her dogged pursuit of becoming an actress, her success shouldn’t come as a surprise.

Words: Antonia Hoyle. Photos: Planet Photos, Rex Features, PA Photos, Alpha, Alstar, NPG

Michelle’s life in movies



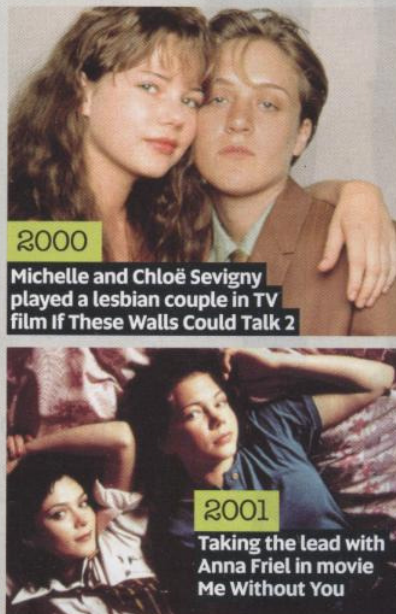
1994

She made her film debut in *Lassie* – notice a resemblance to her daughter Matilda?



1999

Appearing opposite Kirsten Dunst (right) in comedy *Dick* – thankfully, her style’s improved



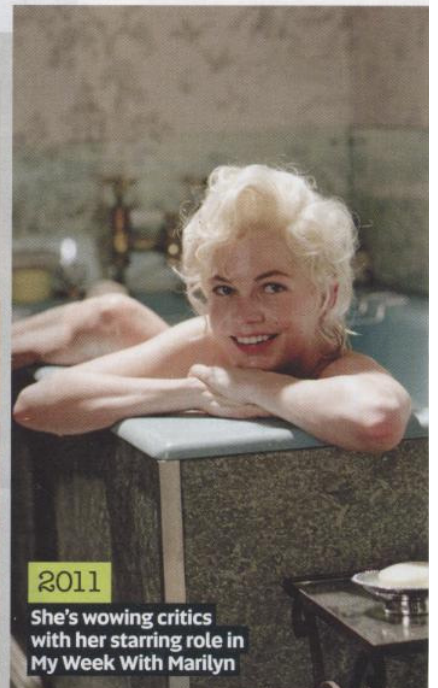
2000

Michelle and Chloë Sevigny played a lesbian couple in TV film *If These Walls Could Talk 2*



2001

Taking the lead with Anna Friel in movie *Me Without You*



2011

She’s wowing critics with her starring role in *My Week With Marilyn*