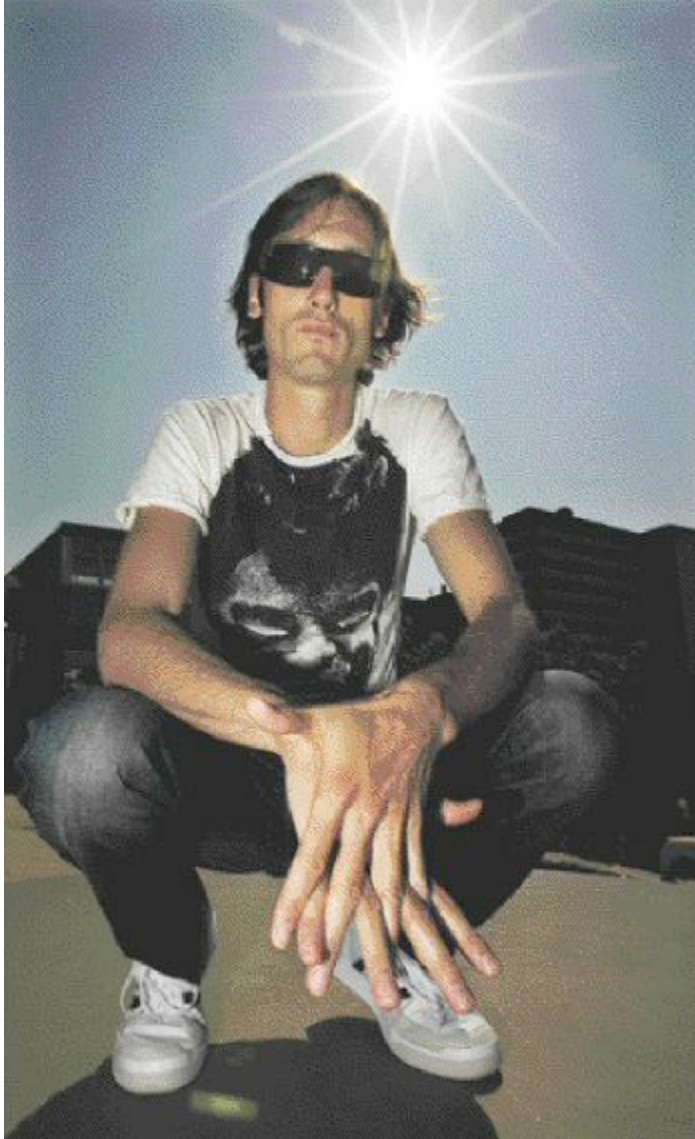


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Filmmaker finds his place in the sunshine

Ryan Ward's psycho-drama centres on man with Tourette's - and power to heal

BY JOHN GRIFFIN, THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 5, 2009



Ryan Ward wrote, directed and stars in *Son of the Sunshine*, which won the Best Feature Audience Choice Award at Malibu, and has its Montreal premiere tonight.

Photograph by: JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE, *The Gazette*

It begins with a mix-up. I'm at the World Film Festival HQ for interviews earlier this week, and Ryan Ward is in town. I don't want to talk to him because I haven't yet seen his film - a debut feature called *Son of the Sunshine*. But we do have a photographer in the hall, so maybe we can get his picture taken after the others that were already ordered, and we could appear to be an efficient organization.

Mistake. Ward appears, and cools heels while another interview goes way past its scheduled time. We finally meet, I say our photog has just gone to feed the parking meter and will be back in a few minutes.

I explain I don't really want to talk about a picture I know nothing about, but as time ticks along, we decide to go outside on the terrace and hang. It is summer after all, even if it is September. Naturally, the talk turns to Son of the Sunshine.

"I spent five years writing a story about a guy with Tourette's Syndrome," explains the intense, 30 year-old Winnepegger-turned-Torontonian.

"I couldn't figure out why I was so fascinated by it. But I'd seen a guy on the subway, an older blind man, who began to bark, crying out obscenity after obscenity, followed by the word 'sorry'. I was intrigued."

Tourette's remains a little-known disorder, characterized by unfocussed rage. That's when the penny dropped for Ward.

"It's a perfect metaphor for me - the angry young man trying to find his way in the world."

After years of butting his head against a wall, Ward suddenly had his script. We, however, did not have our photographer. He'd been called off on another assignment, leaving a message on a cellphone I hadn't heard ring. Some things are just not meant to be.

We reschedule the photo shoot. I tell Ward I'll go, watch his movie, and get back to him.

I screened a DVD copy of Son of the Sunshine at home, was blown off the couch, out the door and down the street.

I called Ward and left a message that included "I can't believe I asked you if it was a drama. It's a drama."

Actually, it's a psycho-drama. A plate-throwing psycho-soap opera, slum-gutter fairy tale and squeegee punk sci-fi, starring Ward as a broken angel whose terrible Tourette's is counterbalanced by a strange power to heal the sick and dying.

The trade-off isn't worth it. Ward's Sonny Johnns undergoes experimental surgery to cure his disorder, which has been seriously compromising his ability to interact with the world. Even if it is a world of no-income housing, JoAnne Nordstrom's no-hope junkie mum and a sharp sister, Meryl (Shantelle Canzanese), who is as close to a friend as Sonny's confrontational man-child can find.

This family isn't dysfunctional. It's a-functional. And Sonny's journey has just begun.

"The role was pretty exhausting," Ward said when we next connected. "I had a permanent crick in the neck, from twitching.

"It's a very personal film for me. Something I needed to say really bad. I threw confidence to the wind.

Nobody can say I wasn't honest."

Once Ward shook off his writer's block, he found a little money, brought aboard an amazing ensemble of non-union T.O. actors ready for the ride to hell, and flew in Chayse Hall, a director of photography from Vancouver who got Ward's desire to shoot it like a film from the 1970s and early '80s, with 16 mm cameras and old lenses. The result has a gritty beauty, but a beauty for all that.

They shot on the run last summer, hustled to add great tunes from real alt stars like Devendra Banhart, Joanna Newsom and Iron and Wine, and premiered at Slamdance in January. It went on to win Best Feature Audience Choice Award at the Malibu Film Festival before its Canadian premiere here tonight and a slate of seven upcoming international festivals. "A great way to travel," Ward admitted.

"The film's central message is 'be who you are as you are. You have value'. We darkened the corners of the story to make the centre brighter, in this bittersweet struggle of life."