

**VIFF 2005 - Interview with "Swimmers" director Doug Sadler**

by Jason Whyte

Set in a small town in the Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland, *Swimmers* tells the story of a small but deeply connected family where water is partially the cause for the slow but sure dysfunction of their unit. The film has a strong cast of known professionals such as Sarah Paulson, Shawn Hatosy, Cherry Jones and Robert Knott, but the film revolves around newcomer Tara Devon Gallagher, who plays Emma, a young girl who gets hearing damage after a swimming accident and receives little to no response from her father who is heading on his own downward spiral.

*Swimmers* is one of the headlining features of this year's American indies series at this year's Vancouver Film Festival and it could not be a better choice, for it represents the kind of storytelling that should be seen more often, rather than green-lighting another Michael Bay or Rob Cohen film that no one wants to see. The film is quiet but powerful, with strong writing and a solid background of talent.

The film's director is Doug Sadler, a New York native who has had much experience with the film's setting and surroundings. I had the opportunity to speak with Mr. Sadler about the film and his experiences in bringing it to the screen.

**Explain the process of writing the script of *Swimmers* and then having it translated to the screen. Is this a common process for you? Are you the kind of filmmaker who can only adapt his own material?**

My basic process in writing *Swimmers* and any script is to get into the head of the characters – to imagine their lives and find a way to respond to the situations they are in. My background is in acting and theatre, so my process is character-centered. I start with the people. In translating that script to the screen I very much believe in collaboration. Truly handing over the roles to the actors and letting them expand and deepen what was on the page. I'm not a stickler for everything being 'just as I wrote it' as long as whatever changes come are thought out and ring true.

I would be very interested in directing other people's scripts or writing scripts for others to direct. As long as I can connect to the characters, I think both processes could be very rewarding.

**Water plays a key theme in the film where its existence is partially the cause for what happens in the film. Could you explain the film's use of water, and have you had any personal experiences that caused you to write about this theme?**

When I was twelve years old my family moved from a farm in rural Louisiana onto a sailboat, where we lived for two years. In both of those settings Nature was very important and I felt an intimate connection with it. Once we moved onto the boat I had a direct experience with the magic and power of the water – whether it was the joy of swimming or the humbling power of a storm at sea. I think that awareness led me to be intimately aware of the way water moved in people's lives in *Swimmers*. It was a conscious choice to entwine the characters in *Swimmers* with the water in terms of their livelihood and their inner peace. That was one of the things that drew me to the watermen of Maryland, because it's one of the few occupations left where people's livelihood is directly dependent upon the health of the natural world.

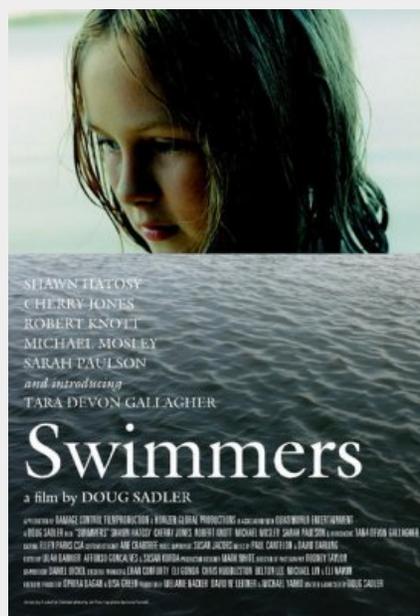
In a larger thematic sense, in some ways water represents the spirit of life in *Swimmers*; it's a place of freedom, danger, passion and ultimately hope. In order to live fully, you have to dive in. Each of the characters lives and happiness in some ways depends upon their distance from the water.

**The film is set in a small town and follows a closely knit group of characters. Are these the kinds of stories that you most identify with, or do you wish to pursue other points of storytelling down the road? What are your favorite kinds of stories?**

I am interested in stories about how people live, love and negotiate their conflict between dreams and reality; ideals and disappointment. I'm interested in all sorts of characters and places ...

**You elected to have the film shot in anamorphic widescreen which is a curious move for an independent feature, which are normally in the more traditional "flat" widescreen process or sometimes even filmed in the Super 35 process. Please explain your decision to shoot the film in this format.**

Since the eastern shore of Maryland is pretty flat with wide expanses of water we felt that the added horizontal impact of anamorphic would fit and accentuate the beauty of the area. That said, I was a little



Swimmers -- Now at 2005 VIFF

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hesitant at first, simply because I was unfamiliar with framing shots at that aspect ratio and getting into close-ups can be a bit more challenging. Both cinematographer Rodney Taylor and producer David Leitner were advocates of shooting anamorphic and I'm ultimately very glad we made that choice. It fits the landscape and the landscape is (I hope) a subtle, ever-present character in the film.

**There is a beautiful shot in the film where Emma is holding her hand into the water and we see everything at flat level so the water reflects her arm. Where did you get the idea for this shot?**

The idea for the moment came in writing the script. I saw it as a point at which Emma is hungering for the solace she found in the water before her accident separated her from it. I suppose the inspiration comes somewhere from my own recollection of dreamy moments as a child when you find some quiet spot to lounge and reflect. In terms of the actual execution, DP Rodney Taylor found a great angle and we were blessed with a calm day, so that the reflections of her arm were interesting without being indecipherable. I'm glad you like that image – to me it encapsulates Emma's spirit – curious, aware, longing - which is in many ways also the spirit of the film.

**There is such a top notch cast in the film, with Cherry Jones, Sarah Paulson, Robert Knott and newcomer Tara Devon Gallagher all giving outstanding work with equal measure. How did this all come together? Did you know all of these actors prior to "Swimmers" or did you just get lucky? Did you have any other particular actors in mind for the film?**

Ultimately, casting is about instincts – knowing when someone is right and following that instinct. Since my background is in acting and theatre, I feel I have a pretty good eye for casting actors who will bring variety and depth to their performances as well as an ability to collaborate with them effectively to allow them to do their best work once they are cast. I did not personally know any of these actors prior to casting the film, but I was aware of some of their previous work.

Casting *Swimmers* was a particular challenge because we were putting together a family, so obviously we not only needed gifted actors, we needed to build an ensemble which would be believable as a family. I worked closely with casting director Ellen Parks (*Secretary, Fur, Sideways*) as well as the producers.

We held an extensive search in NY, LA and through a local casting call in Maryland for the role of Emma, since the film required a mature and open-hearted performance from an eleven year-old, which is not necessarily the easiest thing to achieve. We found Tara Gallagher through the NY sessions and she just blew me away. We did an improvisation based around one of the voice-over sections and she was really alive in her imagination, able respond to imaginary circumstances, rather than reciting lines by rote in a set way – which is what you often get when auditioning kids. After casting Tara, I brought her down to Maryland for a long weekend and we ran around the location house, went swimming etc. to give her a strong sense of what her life would be like if she were Emma. I think that helped her performance in the film a great deal because it gave her imagination the ammunition it needed to really step into the role.

Ellen recommended theatre legend Cherry Jones, who is simply an amazing actress and wonderful human being. I met with Cherry after a play she was doing in NY at the time. Personally, I believe she turns in her best film performance to date in *Swimmers*. Having now won the 2005 Tony for 'Doubt' (her second Tony), hopefully she'll have many more film opportunities in the future.

I read about Sarah Paulson in a review of *Down With Love* in Film Comment and, though her role in that film was wildly different than Merrill in *Swimmers*, something struck me about her. I had a very strong initial instinct that she was the Merrill we were looking for – just from reading the Film Comment article and looking at her in a still from *Down With Love* in a wig with a martini glass. It was odd. A day or two later, Ellen Parks mentioned that Sarah Paulson had read the script and loved it and was very interested. I went to LA and Sarah auditioned – among many, many others since the role of Merrill was hotly pursued by a number of actresses – and Sarah brought the depth, complexity and dangerous seductiveness to Merrill that I was looking for. As an actress, she's wildly gifted and able to turn on a dime.

Ed Harris, whom I met at the Sundance Institute's filmmaking labs, personally recommended his friend Robert Knott for the role of Will. Robert came to the LA auditions and had a strong grasp on the mixture of pain and pride that so isolates Will in the course of the film. Robert was able to walk the delicate line of holding interest and sympathy by keeping the humanity and heart of Will present, even when he's doing things that are less than admirable.

Shawn Hatosy who plays Clyde, is from Maryland and had heard about the script. I met with him at the LA auditions and he expressed his strong desire to play the part. Shawn is an incredibly instinctual actor and in *Swimmers* he had the courage to be raw, vulnerable and true to Clyde's uncertainty and confusion in ways that many young male actors would not.

Mike Mosley who plays Clyde's older brother Mike, came through the NYC casting sessions. I thought he brought a certain humor and devil-may-care cockiness to Mike while not losing sight of his humanity.

As for having actors in mind – I can't say that I did. Sometimes in writing the film I would imagine certain actors, but that was more as a means for facilitating my writing process – not for actually pursuing those actors for the film, because in most cases the ages were off. How would Robert Duvall handle this moment? Emily Watson? Etc. There were discussions and explorations of casting 'more famous' actors in some of the roles, but I am very happy with the cast of the film.

**What was your reaction when you heard that Tara Devon Gallagher had both *Swimmers* at Sundance as well as *Mad Hot Ballroom* (where she is a featured contestant) at Slamdance? Having the same person appear in both a documentary as well as an independent feature is very rare; in fact it may never have happened before.**

I was surprised. I had been talking to Tara and her parents pretty regularly as we prepared to go to Sundance and they hadn't mentioned it. It's a rather strange turn of events, but Tara is quite appealing and talented so it wasn't a complete shock. That *Mad Hot Ballroom* then took off shortly after Slamdance was exciting.

**Speaking of film festivals, how has the film festival experience help shape the movie? Has there been any particular audience response during the screenings or reactions by festivalgoers afterwards?**

*Swimmers* has been well-received at all of its festival appearances and I've had many interesting dialogues with audiences. One particular highlight was the standing ovation the film received from an audience of 500 as the closing night of the Maryland film festival. Another was winning the Grand Jury Prize at the Seattle International Film Festival for Best New American Cinema and reading the jury statement which said "Swimmers transcends discussions of Red States and Blue States, focusing instead on the infinitely more complex, beautiful, and rewarding inner life of real human beings, proving that ordinary people are always the most compelling characters."

I also had a woman in Michigan ask me to repeat the closing lines of the film because she thought they were so poetic and she wanted to remember them. A man from Sweden commented that the film shifted his view of the United States, in that the US is often seen as simply very powerful and very rich and, for him, watching *Swimmers* put a more human face on regular American people and their lives.

The most common response has been that the film reaches people from a wide array of backgrounds on a deep level; that the characters feel very real and resonate long after the film is over. Since I got into filmmaking to reach out to people in a darkened theatre and offer them a greater appreciation and understanding for other people's lives and therefore their own, that's exactly the response I would want.

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**This is a film made through the independent scene rather than having studio financing. What are the biggest challenges you have had on the making and releasing of this movie? If you are having problems securing a distributor, do you think the problem lies in the studio's ignorance that people may not want to see this movie?**

In the independent film world, putting together – and holding together - the financing to make the film is always the biggest challenge. In our case we also had hurricane Isabel to contend with – which flooded our sets and shut us down for a few days. That sort of delay is always costly, but in the case of an independent film like *Swimmers*, is particularly challenging. Throughout the process of making the film, the loyalty and support of the cast and crew really made the difference. There were many moments when everything could have fallen apart, but people always responded – I think because they felt the film had something to say.

In terms of distribution – which we are still pursuing with some positive possibilities – the struggle seems to be with how to market the film. *Swimmers* is about the resilience of the human spirit in the face of a faltering American dream, so it's a film about heart, but it doesn't have easy, sexy hooks – at least from a distribution perspective. I know audiences find much in the film to savor, but distribution decisions are guided much more often by fear than by courage, so if a film isn't quirky or sexy or scary, if it appeals to appeals to heart and head in a subtle way rather than offering an immediate jolt, then it's going to be an uphill journey. Given the awards the film has won and the quality of the performances as well as the passion of audience response, I will admit that I've been a bit surprised at how steep that hill has become.

*Swimmers* is playing at the 24th Vancouver International Film Festival. For showtimes and more information on this film and the other entries in this years Vancouver IFF, please point your browser to [viff.org](http://viff.org). Special thanks to Doug Sadler for this interview. Comments about this piece are encouraged and can be sent to Jason at [jasonwhyte@efilmcritic.com](mailto:jasonwhyte@efilmcritic.com) (Click to send an email)

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