

Everybody wants something they can't have.

swimmers

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Everybody wants something they can't have.

swimmers



SYNOPSIS

Shot entirely on Maryland's Eastern Shore, "Swimmers" is an inspiring story of human frailty and individual strength in the face of a fracturing American dream – as observed through the eyes of an 11-year-old daughter of a Chesapeake Bay waterman.

"Swimmers" was written and directed by Doug Sadler – who received his MFA degree from the American Film Institute – and stars two-time Tony Award-winner **Cherry Jones**, Maryland native **Shawn Hatosy**, **Sarah Paulson**, **Robert Knott**, and **Tara Devon Gallagher**.

After debuting at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, the film went on to win the coveted Grand Jury Prize for "Best New American Film" from the Seattle International Film Festival, as well as "Best Director" and "Best Narrative Feature" from the Savannah Film Festival, "Best Script" and "Best Actor" (Robert Knott) from the Cartagena Film Festival in Spain, and "Best American Independent Film" from the Festroia International Film Festival in Portugal.

"Swimmers" marks the astonishing acting debut of a major new talent, **Tara Devon Gallagher**, in the pivotal role of 11-year-old Emma Tyler – whose passion for swimming is suddenly disrupted by an ear injury requiring expensive surgery. Gallagher's only prior onscreen appearance was as one of the featured dance competitors in the hit documentary, "Mad Hot Ballroom."

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Robert Knott – who previously co-starred in Ed Harris’ “Pollack” and Walter Hill’s “Wild Bill” – plays Emma’s father, a waterman struggling with the fact that his profession is teetering on the brink of extinction as the Chesapeake’s once-productive fishery continues to spiral downward.

In her most prominent screen role to date, Broadway legend **Cherry Jones** portrays Emma’s fiercely-determined mother, who has no choice but to become the emotional jetty that keeps the family from being swept away by financial crisis and outside influences. Jones won her second Tony Award for Best Actress last year in “Doubt,” and will be seen starring with Ralph Fiennes in the Broadway revival of Brian Friel’s “Faith Healer,” which opens April 18.

In “Swimmers,” **Sarah Paulson** tackles her most challenging film role to date as Merrill, the mysterious, kohl-eyed beauty who suddenly turns up in town in a desperate attempt to understand her own emotionally-troubled past. As the story unfolds, Merrill and Emma – who is shattered by her own recent loss – form a delicate bond that becomes their sanctuary from the personal crises that threaten to drown both. As Merrill becomes an oasis for Emma, who feels invisible at home, she in turn finds herself growing ever dependent on the unconditional friendship the child provides.

Most recently, Paulson co-starred with Jessica Lange on Broadway last year in “The Glass Menagerie,” and just completed a limited engagement opposite Annette Bening in “The Cherry Orchard” at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

Shawn Hatosy, who grew up in Frederick, Maryland, co-stars in “Swimmers” as Emma’s brother, the town’s newly-installed police officer who first encounters Merrill wandering aimlessly at the bottom of an empty pool, then falls in love with her. Hatosy has previously co-starred in such films as “Outside Providence,” and can be currently seen in Nick Cassavetes’ “Alpha Dog,” which debuted at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival.

Following “Swimmers”’ Sundance premiere, James Greenberg of *The Hollywood Reporter*, wrote: “Before Miramax brought independent film to the multiplex and Sundance made it a national sport, American independent cinema was about regional filmmaking. Small, well-told stories rooted in a specific time and place. A rocky coming-of-age tale set along the Maryland coast, ‘Swimmers’ is that kind of film.”

It’s not surprising that Doug Sadler says, “I personally feel the more interesting

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stories are the ones that are rooted in a place.” Born in the bayou country outside New Orleans, he has lived on the Chesapeake’s Eastern Shore since high school, and continues to divide his time between Easton and New York.

“My creative juices seem to flow more here,” he says of his decision to stay rooted in Maryland. “I find the rural element of it interesting, talking to people who work with their hands, the openness of the landscape. It feeds me creatively.”



PRODUCTION NOTES

“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,” says writer-director Doug Sadler about his film’s compelling motif.

“Swimmers” – which debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005 and won the Grand Jury Prize for Best New American Film from the Seattle International Film Festival, among other honors during the year – takes place on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay where generations of “watermen” have made their living off the blue crabs, oysters, and striped bass that once flourished in the area.

At the core of the story is the Tyler family, who are suddenly facing a financial and spiritual crisis. “Each of the characters in the film has a relationship with the water and each is struggling in their own way to keep from being drowned by their emotions and circumstances,” Sadler explains.

The title and theme of the film was inspired by the Latin name for the Chesapeake Bay’s indigenous Maryland blue crab – *callinectes sapidus* – which translates to “beautiful swimmers.”

“The crab’s life cycle requires it to shed its shell in order to grow, during which time they are called ‘peelers.’ It’s a vulnerable and necessary time of transition, and it’s that moment of delicate transition that I was interested in exploring in each of these

characters. The crabs are threatened, these people are threatened,” he explains.

The Sundance Film Festival – in making the film an official selection of its American Spectrum showcase and finalist for the Humanitas Prize – called “Swimmers” “a uniquely American story that combines an Arthur Miller sense of drama with emotive Edward Hoppersque photography. ‘Swimmers’ draws us in as naturally as the tide with the sharp reflections of its truth and humanity...”

Following its premiere in Park City, James Greenberg of the *Hollywood Reporter* wrote: “Before Miramax brought independent film to the multiplex and Sundance made it a national sport, American independent cinema was about regional filmmaking. Small, well-told stories rooted in a specific time and place. A rocky coming-of-age tale set along the Maryland coast, ‘Swimmers’ is that kind of film.”

It’s not surprising that Sadler says: “I personally feel the more interesting stories are the ones that are rooted in a place.” He has lived most of his life in rural environments, starting with a quarter horse farm near New Orleans until the age of 12. After his family sold everything and moved onto a 51-foot sailboat to sail through the Caribbean, they settled in Easton – an historic town of around 12,000 established in 1711 on the Chesapeake’s Eastern Shore – where Sadler attended high school and returned summers during college to work on one of the ferries featured in the film. He also continues to live there with his wife and young son, when they’re not in New York.

“In both of those settings Nature was very important and I felt an intimate connection with it. And on 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,” he says.

“I think that this 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.”

“Swimmers” was filmed entirely on location in and around an authentic waterman’s town, Oxford, Maryland, where commercial fishing was once the lifeblood of the local economy – since replaced by an influx of wealthy newcomers building multi-

million dollar weekend estates.

“I was always curious about these elegant workboats and the people who made their living on them,” he says of a profession on the brink of extinction as the health of the Chesapeake, the largest estuary on the North American continent impacted environmentally by five or more states, continues to decline. As an example, the female blue crab populations alone have deteriorated by 80% in just the past 12 years.

“One of the initial inspirations for this film came when we were living on the sailboat. There's an island in the Chesapeake – Smith Island - that we visited while learning how to sail. It's one of the more isolated, deeply-entrenched watermen communities in Maryland. We were holed up there for a storm for like three or four days, and my dad and I went to a local oyster fry. The sense of a unique, tightly entwined community was palpable. It reminded me a bit of the uniqueness and depth of the Cajun culture of Louisiana,” he says.

As he became more involved in writing and filmmaking, Sadler kept returning to the subject of the watermen. “I knew some of these guys. There's an awareness of those people, of watermen, all throughout that community. You meet people on the ferryboat, around the docks. You go and have a beer, and you're going to be sitting next to a waterman – though less and less at this point. I also read a lot of books about the watermen,” Sadler says. Among them was William Warner's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beautiful Swimmers*.

Writing and developing the script

“I'm interested in stories about how people live, love and negotiate their conflict between dreams and reality,” says Sadler, who began writing “Swimmers” in 1995, the same year he received his MFA from the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

With over a decade of acting experience in regional theater, Sadler says, “Acting is the root of it all for me. Writing for me is ‘acting’ all of the parts. That moment-to-moment behavior, the subtlety, the believability of what people say and how they behave in a moment – I mean, it's kind of how I do it, what I am. I wouldn't know how to do it otherwise. That and pulling from my own life. The place that I came to Emma's voice was from when I was ten and living on a farm in rural Louisiana where everything felt very alive. You know, that sort of imagination and dream kind of state that is much present when you are a kid.”

Indeed, he notes, "I was very surprised when I went to film school how few directors had any background or any real interest in acting. To me, it just seems like, 'what the hell are you doing!' You know, there is a technical seduction that occurs for new directors with the camera and suddenly everything becomes about that. But there is a balance to be struck there."

Sadler also doesn't believe in the auteur style of filmmaking. "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 stickler for everything being *just as I wrote it* as long as whatever changes come are thought out and ring true," he says.

Getting "Swimmers" made

In June 2001, Sadler hired Melanie Backer, a well-known producer's rep, to handle the release of "Riders," which ultimately debuted on the Sundance Channel.

Backer was so impressed with his script for "Swimmers" that she alerted *Filmmaker Magazine*, which featured him as one of the "25 New Faces of Independent Film" to watch. Indeed, the Sundance Institute saw it and invited Sadler to apply for their January 2002 Screenwriters Lab, and "Swimmers" was one of only 11 projects accepted.

"It's a five day workshop where your script is read by high-profile writers who then meet with you in intense feedback sessions," he says of the experience. "So you have like six or eight of those meetings and they pull you apart, and they don't really put you back together necessarily. Then you go off and you rewrite."

Sadler returned to Los Angeles, where he was living at the time, completed another draft, and applied to the Sundance Institute's annual Filmmakers Lab that June. This time, only six projects were accepted, "Swimmers" among them.

So he returned to the Sundance Village in Utah and spent four weeks collaborating with professional actors and video production crews, shooting and editing scenes from his own script. Among the advisors he got to work directly with were Sundance founder Robert Redford, actor/director Ed Harris, director Alfonso Cuarón ("Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban"), cinematographer Robert Elswit ("Syriana"), editor Curtiss Clayton ("Mrs. Harris"), and actress Sally Field.

"The Sundance Labs gave me the opportunity to go over the script and the story with a fine-toothed comb in the presence of some very established and generous

filmmakers. It also afforded an invaluable opportunity which I don't believe exists anywhere else: the opportunity to rehearse, shoot and edit portions of your film with the knowledge that you're going to throw it all away," he says.

“Since you're shooting then editing right away, the moment when you say ‘why didn't I shoot x, y or z’ is nearly immediate. So the filmmaking lab brings the needs of the cutting room into sharp focus. Because of the costs of shooting a film, it's the kind of freedom to explore and experiment and immediately see the results (and get criticized for them) that is unheard of. It was very rewarding and also not just a little confusing in that you get twenty or so perspectives on the story you're trying to tell. Ultimately, I had to consider everything everyone said, then go back to my own root instinct and rely on that.”

This time, after returning to Los Angeles, Sadler and Backer (who was now a producer on “Swimmers”), began looking for financing. The process took them to New York to the Independent Feature Project's annual Market & Conference known as “No Borders” – and that's where they ran into David Leitner, someone Backer had known for years. Leitner told her he had formed a partnership with real estate developer Michael Yanko. They read the script and agreed to find the funding necessary to get it made, becoming producers with Backer in the process.

Casting “Swimmers”

The Hollywood Reporter wrote: “It's the wonderful performances that make these people come alive. Gallagher, in her film debut, is soulful without being sappy, and Jones as her mother turns in her usual nuanced work. She can show more with a crease of the brow than most actors can with a page of dialogue. Veteran character actor Knott captures the darkness and light and quicksilver personality of a man at his wit's end. Beautiful work all around.”

Ellen Parks, the casting director on 25 independent films to date, as well as the New York aspects of “Sideways” and “Election” for director Alexander Payne, scoured the talent pool in Los Angeles, New York and the eastern shore of Maryland.

“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,” says Sadler, who spent a decade pursuing an acting career before studying for an MFA degree at the American Film Institute.

Casting “Swimmers” was a particular challenge, he explains, 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 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?”

For the role of 11-year-old Emma, they even held a local casting call in Maryland, “since the film requires a mature and open-hearted performance from an eleven year-old – which is not necessarily the easiest thing to achieve,” says Sadler.

“We found Tara Gallagher through the New York 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 to respond to imaginary circumstances – rather than reciting lines by rote in a set way, which is what you often get when auditioning kids.”

For the role of Julia, Emma’s mother, Parks recommended theater legend Cherry Jones, the two-time Tony Award-winner for Best Actress for “Doubt” (2005) and “The Heiress” (1995), among a slew of other top Broadway honors.

“She’s simply an amazing actress and a wonderful human being,” says Sadler, who met her after a play she was appearing in at the time. “Cherry is just completely solid and deep and subtle, but I think I came to appreciate her subtlety more once I was in the editing room. I knew she was delivering the goods when we were shooting, but the fact that there were other layers at work, I didn’t quite know to that degree at that time. She brings an innate strength to that character which is not necessarily the easiest thing to do given the material.”

For the part of Merrill – the mysterious stranger who arrives in town and forms an unlikely bond with Emma – Sadler remembers reading about Sarah Paulson in a review of “Down With Love” in *Film Comment* and having “a very strong instinct that she was the Merrill we were looking for. It was odd.” Then, within a day or two, Parks called, saying that Paulson had read the script and loved it.

Because a number of major actresses were vying for the role, Paulson was one of

many being auditioned in Los Angeles. “Sarah blew me away at the audition,” says Sadler. “She brings this really deep wound and a complexity to the role. There were other actors who gave me a read as ‘I’m angry and sexy’ for that part and you’d give them notes and then you’d get ‘I’m messed up and I’m in pain’ – but the Merrill character constantly has this seduction and control game going on.”

Robert Knott – who plays Will, a waterman struggling with the reality that his beloved livelihood is slipping away forever – was recommended to Sadler by Ed Harris, one of Sadler’s creative advisers at the Sundance Filmmakers Lab. Knott and Harris had remained close friends since playing brothers in “Pollock” in 2000.

“Robert worked on an oil rig for a number of years in Kuwait during the 1970s. He came to the L.A. 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 grew up in Maryland, received the script from his agent, who told him he was really going to like it. Hatosy read it and agreed. In fact, he became relentless about getting the part – going so far as calling “Swimmers” producer Melanie Backer and dragging her to a screening of his latest movie. Backer was so impressed she arranged a private meeting with Sadler – who offered Hatosy the role the same evening. A week later, Hatosy was reading with the actresses hoping to play Merrill.

“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,” Sadler relates.

Shooting the film

“One of the more valuable things we did during pre-production was to let the actors soak up the area and the people,” says Sadler.

He began by bringing Gallagher to location a week before the rest of the cast “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.”

Soon after arriving on location, actor Robert Knott (Will) arranged to borrow a boat from one of the local fishermen and “spent a lot of time out on the Chesapeake Bay”

with fellow cast mates Cherry Jones (Julia), Shawn Hatosy (Clyde) and Michael Mosley (Mike). To prepare for their roles, he says he and Jones, who plays his wife, also went through the entire script, asking themselves, "What can we do in this script without saying a word?' Because this is how families are."

Sara Paulson, who plays Merrill, felt Sadler's background as an actor "totally made a difference to me, because often directors have no idea what the process is. So they'll say something well intentioned, but it just comes off as enormously unhelpful. It happens a lot, and I always feel like the best directors are the ones who not only understand the process, but respect it. They sort of understand that it may take a minute to get somewhere. And with a movie like this – where we didn't have a huge amount of money to do many, many takes – it helps for someone to really understand before he rolls the camera that we can have a little bit of a conversation about the inner life of the character or the real goings on of the scene."

Like all independent films, "Swimmers" was made on a limited budget and stringent shooting schedule. One can only imagine then the challenge it presented to adhere to both when Hurricane Isabel made landfall nearby during the first week of production and flooded both the town of Oxford and the film's sets. The dirt road leading to the set used for the Tyler's house in Bosman, Maryland, had to be rebuilt after resting under three feet of water. Nevertheless, there were no injuries, the sets eventually dried out and only several days of production were lost.

"Swimmers" is one of the first low-budget films made in the U.S. to be completed 100% digitally. Undergoing a process called "Digital Intermediate," each frame of its entire 35mm negative was scanned into a digital file, which was then color corrected and digitally enhanced under the supervision of Director of Photography Rodney Taylor at Post Logic Studios in Los Angeles, a leader in this new technique. When finished, all of the digital files were recorded back to 35mm film for conventional projection.

Careful thought and planning also went into the cinematography, as Sadler had decided to tell the story largely from the perspective of 11-year-old Emma.

"Rodney and I were conscious of texture and detail in framing shots," he says. "We also wanted to find a look for the film that held a certain imaginative quality while maintaining a grounded style. So both in shooting and color correction, we were conscious of not allowing things to become too saturated in terms of color. In terms of specific shots and the progression of the look, we begin the film very close on Emma at

"Swimmers" Production Notes

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the pool and find specific moments throughout to share her fascination with living things – close-ups of ants, the delicacy of putting her hand in the water, her moment with the injured squirrel in the empty pool. These were some of the moments I chose to emphasize her connection with nature.”

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Everybody wants something they can't have.

swimmers



DOUG SADLER

Biography

“Swimmers” is director-writer Doug Sadler’s second feature film. A former professional actor, he received his MFA from the American Film Institute in 1995, the same year he began writing “Swimmers.” In 2001, he was chosen by *Filmmaker Magazine* as one of “25 New Faces” to watch. The following year, Sadler’s first feature, “Riders,” debuted at the Los Angeles Film Festival, then premiered on the Sundance Channel. In 2004, he was invited to refine “Swimmers” at the Sundance Institute’s prestigious Writing and Directing Labs.

“Swimmers” debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2005, where it became a finalist for the distinguished Humanitas Prize. It went on to win the Grand Jury Prize for “Best New American Film” from the Seattle Film Festival, “Best American Independent Film” from the Festroia International Film Festival in Portugal, “Best Actor” (Robert Knott) from the Cartagena Film Festival in Spain, and “Best Director” and “Best Narrative Feature” from the Savannah Film Festival. The film has also been an official selection at over a dozen international festivals during the last year, including in Germany, Ireland, the Czech Republic, and Portugal.

Following its Sundance premiere, James Greenberg of *The Hollywood Reporter*, wrote: “Before Miramax brought independent film to the multiplex and Sundance made it a national sport, American independent cinema was about regional filmmaking. Small, well-told stories rooted in a specific time and place. A rocky coming-of-age tale set along the Maryland coast, ‘Swimmers’ is that kind of film.”

It’s not surprising that Sadler says: “I personally feel the more interesting stories are the ones that are rooted in a place.” He has lived much of his life in rural environments – including on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay, where this inspiring story of human frailty and individual strength in the face of a fracturing American dream takes place.

Sadler was born in New Orleans and spent his early years on a quarter horse farm on the northern shore of Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana. When he was 12, his parents – a Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance general agent who had built one of the company’s top three offices in the country and a psychotherapist – opted to change their lives, sold the farm and bought a 51-foot sailboat, on which the Sadler family (including two dogs and a cat) would spend the next year and a half on the water.

During the first six months, they learned to sail on Chesapeake Bay (his mother had grown up in the Washington DC area). “My dad had been in the Navy, and he sailed as a kid, but the rest of us were pretty much learning,” he says. Then they headed south to the Bahamas and eventually made it all the way down to Grenada, stopping in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, before returning home a year later.

Back in the States, they learned for the first time that the Louisiana warehouse, where all of their possessions had been stored, had burned down. So they decided to return to the Chesapeake area and settled in the historic Maryland town of Easton, where Sadler started his freshman year at Easton High and now resides part-time with his wife and son. His parents still live in nearby Oxford, where principal photography on “Swimmers” took place.

Looking back, Sadler says that the time on the boat “was great. I really flourished out there. We did a lot of windsurfing, a lot of spear fishing. I’m not sure it really set me up for high school very well, because I was used to being treated more or less as an adult. So I really wasn’t used to having to say, ‘Yes, sir, yes, ma’am.’ ‘Can I go to the bathroom, please?’ All that stuff seemed very stupid to me when I got back.”

He ended up finishing school a year early to attend Vanderbilt University, where he created his own interdisciplinary degree in theater, film, and writing.

There was no grand career plan at the time, he says. “I was pretty focused on acting initially, but I'd always been writing. In retrospect, it's all worked out fine, but coming out of there I was a little unsure what I was going to do. I knew I wanted to continue exploring theater, but I was always interested in films. When we were on the boat, the bars in port would show movies and I'd take the dinghy in and watch whatever they were playing - Bond movies, “Streetcar Named Desire,” “On The Waterfront,” “All That Jazz” – that sort of thing.”

During two summer vacations, Sadler returned home and worked as a deck hand on the ferry that is seen in “Swimmers,” as well as in one of the local restaurants. The one thing he never got around to doing was picking crabs for a living.

Sadler graduated from Vanderbilt in 1989, and spent that summer in an intensive acting workshop at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. “I was debating whether to go to grad school for acting,” he says. Instead, he returned home to the Chesapeake Bay, where he spent the next four months “not sure what to do with myself.”

He finally decided on a move to Seattle, where he would remain for several years. While varnishing boats for a living, among other odd jobs, he acted in experimental theater, wrote and directed two one-act plays, and made an experimental short film that no one ever saw. While still in Seattle, he was cast in three plays at the Spokane Interplayers Ensemble in Spokane, Washington. “They paid well enough to actually live, so it was a good gig,” he says with a laugh.

Meanwhile, a friend from college had started a theater in Atlanta in conjunction with Seven Stages Theater, and invited Sadler to take the lead in a production of “Hamlet.” About the same time, he was accepted into the graduate program at the American Film Institute.

“I'd always been interested in film. I may have been a bit disillusioned with theater in terms of my place within it. I still love theater and still like to be involved in it, but film held a certain magical draw. It seemed like the most powerful medium of communicating about the human heart. I think theater is powerful, too, but this felt more like a place that I could put my energies that would be more fruitful over the long haul.”

Sadler graduated in 1995, the same year he began writing “Swimmers,” but stayed in Los Angeles another five years. He survived by penning CD reviews and features on musicians for the House of Blues website, and served as an assistant director on independent films and commercials shooting in the area.

Meanwhile, he thought he had “Swimmers” set up, but the financing fell through. So, in 2000, Sadler returned home to Maryland and wrote “Riders,” his first film to be shot.

“I wrote it over three months and just immediately started raising money. I’d gotten to a place where I needed to make a film. If I was going to do this, I needed to go ahead and do it – that I was not going to get permission. There was not going to be a moment where someone put their hand on my shoulder and said, ‘You’re great, go forward.’ It was either time to step over the cliff and make something happen or not.”

The *LA Weekly* praised Sadler for displaying “courage that’s rare in American films,” while The *Baltimore City Paper* called “Riders” “a quietly stirring road movie reminiscent of Wim Wenders’ 1974 film ‘Alice in the Cities.’” Both feature a vagabond hipster saddled with caring for a little girl after the youngster’s self-centered mom ditches her, but the resemblance ends there. Whereas ‘Alice’ is bittersweet, hopeful, and sticks to the road, ‘Riders’ evolves into a brooding, dark comment on the disintegrating American family.”

Sadler is married to Linda Farwell, a professional photographer who shoots for major magazines and corporate clients. They have a three-year-old son, Emery, and divide their time between New York and Easton.

“My creative juices seem to flow more here,” he says of his decision to stay rooted on the Chesapeake, where they live in a converted warehouse. “I find the rural element of it interesting, talking to people who work with their hands, the openness of the landscape. It feeds me creatively.”

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swimmers



CHERRY JONES

Biography

“Swimmers” stars one of the most celebrated Broadway actresses of the last decade – Cherry Jones.

To date, this acclaimed thespian has appeared in 11 major Broadway productions and earned two prestigious **Tony Awards** for Best Actress (for “Doubt” in 2005 and “The Heiress” in 1995), three **Drama Desk Awards**, two **Obie Awards**, three **Outer Critics Circle Awards**, and two additional Tony nominations (2000’s “A Moon for the Misbegotten” and 1991’s “Our Country’s Good”), among other honors.

Variety has called her “perhaps the most beguiling theater actress of her generation (or certainly in the top five)” and critic Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* has written that Jones is “a primary source of warmth in the New York theater today.”

Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* wrote of Jones in 1995: “In her career, she has been consistently acclaimed in the widest diversity of roles, from the fierce convict in ‘Our Country’s Good’ to the mousy academic who turns into a swashbuckler in ‘Good Night, Desdemona.’ Along the way, she has played major roles in plays by Shakespeare, Chekhov and Brecht...With a physical daring to match her emotional range, she is known as a risk-taker, someone who would literally go out on a limb. In one production at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., she had to walk the narrowest of planks over the heads of theatergoers, backward in the dark. With characteristic self-confidence, she says, ‘The more outrageous the

request, the more I love it.”

And the *Washington Post* noted of her debut in John Patrick Shanley’s Pulitzer Prize-winning drama in early 2005: “For her work in "Doubt," absolutely marvelous would be the verdict....In the press, she's been hailed as "brilliant," "magnificent," "divine" and "incomparable," among other things, and she's expected to have a good chance to pick up her second Tony this spring.” Which, of course, she did.

In early January 2006, Jones completed her run in “Doubt” with an astonishing 452 performances. “It was about as perfect an experience as one could have, so I feel exhilarated and ready for the next,” she says of the production she helped turn into Broadway’s highest-grossing original play of all-time.

Indeed, she will spend the first half of 2006 on Broadway starring with Ralph Fiennes and Ian McDiarmid in Jonathan Kent’s revival of Brian Friel’s “Faith Healer.”

Then, in September, Jones will embark on her first national tour, in which she will reprise her Tony Award-winning performance in “Doubt” in major cities over a period of six months.

In “Swimmers,” Jones’ largest film role to date, she gives another mesmerizing performance – this time as the fiercely-determined wife of a Chesapeake Bay waterman who is struggling to hold onto his livelihood and mother of an 11-year-old daughter who suddenly needs expensive surgery, sending the family into a financial tailspin.

“She’s the matriarch of a family who’s bottoming out, and she has got to be the glue that binds everything together,” says Jones of her character. “She’s going to keep the faith in everyone, but if someone has to be cut loose for the sake of the family, namely her dear husband of many years, so be it.”

After seeing “Swimmers” at the Sundance Festival, James Greenberg of the *Hollywood Reporter* wrote: “It’s the wonderful performances that make these people come alive....[Jones] turns in her usual nuanced work. She can show more with a crease of the brow than most actors can with a page of dialogue.”

Jones says she chose “Swimmers” because of the screenplay’s “absolute bare bones reality. There’s something very poetic about it. I like to do work that gives people hope and that makes people realize they’re not alone in their struggle, and that’s what this film represents to me.”

Doug Sadler, who directed her in “Swimmers” (and also wrote the script), says, “Cherry is just completely solid and deep and subtle. But I think I came to appreciate her subtlety more once I was in the editing room. I knew she was delivering the goods when we were shooting, but the fact that there were other layers at work, I didn't quite know to that degree at that time. She brings an innate strength to that character.”

The rural location of the “Swimmers” story is something Jones knows intimately. She was raised in Paris, Tennessee, population: 10,000.

Growing up in a small town, she says, “made me completely who I am. There’s a sense of responsibility that comes from being in a small town – a sense of responsibility for the community, whatever that community is, as you grow up. I come from a kind of unusual little town in that it has maintained its soul and its spirit and its strong ties to one another by hard work. It’s blessed with a lot of great leaders, this little town.”

Jones’ mother taught high school literature. Her father was a florist. At the age of three, she knew she wanted to become a performer. It took just one tap dance in front of a group of grown-ups and the applause that followed. “It was that simple. Just a little bit of approval and applause, and I was hooked for life,” she says with a laugh.

An early influence was a local retired high school speech and drama teacher – Ruby Kider (dubbed “Miss Ruby” by Jones) – who held classes for kids with “stutters and sibilant S’s, and just sort of hyperactive kids whose parents wanted to put them somewhere in the afternoon. She was a great, wonderful Pied Piper in my home town. She had all these wonderful scarves, and we would do play pretend. And, of course, I had died and gone to heaven.”

Jones got to see her first staged play at the age of eight or nine, while visiting the Smoky Mountains in Virginia. “We went to the Barter Theater and saw ‘The Country Girl’ by Odets. I was too young to really understand what was going on, but in the final moment in the play, I remember the actress stepped down to the lip of the stage (we were in the front row), and then she looked out and said her final lines. The lights went to dark, but they ghosted the way stage lights used to do. There was always an afterglow. I thought the afterglow was the last burst of her soul. That sealed the deal. I thought, ‘I want to do that!’ I will never forget it, as long as I live.”

In high school, Jones turned out for competitive speech, specializing in dramatic readings. “I started doing tournaments and I would just win everything,” she chuckles. “It’s a wonderful training ground for an actor.”

At the same time, Miss Ruby arranged for Jones, then 16, to attend a high school summer drama program at Northwestern University. During her stay, she had the profound experience of seeing Colleen Dewhurst on stage in “A Moon for the Misbegotten.”

“It was like a blinding light. It really was. This woman who seemed like she was six foot-seven. I mean, she just seemed so massive on that stage, this huge Mother Earth figure with that gorgeous head of hair and that smokey laugh. I’d never seen a woman do that before. I thought women all had to have pink fingernails and be there just to please. You know what I mean? You saw those kind of strong women back in the ‘40s, but by the ‘60s and ‘70s, with feminism came the end of strong women in popular culture. It was a very odd thing, the switch that happened.”

Indisputably, the biggest influence on her career choice was her maternal grandmother, the irrepressible Thelma Cherry. “She was just great,” Jones enthuses. “She was an artist in her own right. She could play anything by ear. Her older brother, Bailey, brought her sheet music from Memphis on the train and we listened to every song produced from about 1915 on. When I was a little girl, she’d take the train down to Memphis and visit her cousin. They’d see every movie that came out. They’d just go from movie to movie to movie – and she wanted me to be an actress. She would always say, ‘You’re not going to get married young. You’re going to be my little career girl.’”

Unfortunately, Thelma died when Jones was a senior in high school. “But she’s always with me. I always place her in the back row of the theater or up in the fly. She’s always out there.”

When it came time for college, Jones expectedly picked drama as her major. “There was nothing else I was any good at,” she jokes. And her choice of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh was based simply on “they took me. I did not have good grades.” She had sent her college exam scores off to different schools, “wherever I heard there was a good drama program.” But Carnegie Mellon was the only one that wrote back, “congratulating me on these sub-mediocre scores. And I thought, *Oh, this is the place for me!*”

There was still one hurdle to get over. “Lo and behold, they auditioned hundreds and hundreds of kids. I think they accepted something like 38. And I got in, much to my surprise. It was a great place for me to be, because I was from such a small town, I needed a sort of halfway house to New York, and Pittsburgh was my halfway house,” she says.

Following graduation from Carnegie Mellon, with a BFA in drama, in 1978, Jones headed

straight to New York. While waiting for any kind of professional break, she survived by waiting tables, but lasted only three weeks in her first job.

“I was fired for being too slow,” she remembers with a laugh. “And then I ended up scooping chicken salad and ice cream at a place on 72nd and Columbus – which was fantastic, because I got to wait on everybody I ever dreamed of getting to see in person. Such as John Lennon and Yoko, Lauren McCall, who I actually know now.

She finally got accepted into the fledgling acting company at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Fortunately, they didn’t renew her contract for a second year. Instead, the director, Andrei Belgrader, recommended Jones to Robert Brustein, the renowned founding director of the Yale Repertory Theater who was in the midst of setting up a new regional company – to be called the American Repertory Theater – at Harvard.

She was cast as Rosalind in Belgrader’s production of “As You Like It,” and Jones became a resident member of the company – performing in 25 A.R.T. productions over the next decade.

Meanwhile, she made her Broadway debut in “Stepping Out” in 1987, followed a year later as Lady Macduff in the revival of “Macbeth,” starring Glenda Jackson and Christopher Plummer.

Her other Broadway turns over the years include “Imaginary Friends” (2003), “Major Barbara” (2001), “A Moon for the Misbegotten” (2000), “The Night of the Iguana” (1996), “The Heiress” (1995), “Angels in America: Perestroika” (replacement, 1993-94), “Angels in America: Millennium Approaches” (replacement, 1993-94), and “Our Country’s Good” (1991).

Since making her film debut in 1987, she has co-starred in the motion pictures “Ocean’s Twelve,” “The Village,” “Signs,” and “Cradle Will Rock,” among others.

Jones’ parents – who she says always supported her quest to act – ventured up to New York in 1995, to watch their daughter in “The Heiress” in what would become her first Tony Award-winning outing. “I think for my folks what was even more thrilling than the performance was walking down the street in New York City and looking up – and seeing a big, huge drawing of me as Catherine Sloper on the marquee of the theater. That, I have a feeling, probably took their breath a bit,” she relates.

“It certainly took mine when I was riding my bicycle down Broadway the first time I saw it. I think for anyone in the performing arts, when you finally get to a point where they put your picture up, you just have to pinch yourself. It cannot be so.”



TARA DEVON GALLAGHER

Biography

“Swimmers” marks the acting debut of a major new talent, Tara Devon Gallagher, who co-stars in the pivotal role of 11-year-old Emma Tyler.

In her only other film appearance, Gallagher was one of the dance contestants showcased (as herself) in the hit documentary, “Mad Hot Ballroom.”

The fact Gallagher had never had an acting class – much less ever acted before – didn’t concern “Swimmers” director-writer Doug Sadler, who auditioned hundreds of pre-teens in New York, Los Angeles and Maryland.

“The Emma character requires a certain depth and intensity. Tara blew me away in her initial audition when I asked her to use her own words in describing the boats and activity mentioned in one of the voiceovers. I interrupted her and asked her questions about what she was describing, and it was clear she was seeing and experiencing those things in her mind’s eye,” Sadler says.

“Tara brought a lot of heart to the role and she clearly connected to Emma’s situation and shared her ability to see magic in nature and the everyday. She was alive to her own imagination as well as carrying the depth, maturity and complexity I needed in Emma to make

her observations in the voiceovers feel organic and make her relationship with Merrill believable.”

Everyone who worked with Gallagher on the film found her disarmingly mature for her age. “She’s literally like a 40-year-old woman trapped in a 12-year-old body,” laughs Sara Paulson, who plays Merrill, the enigmatic young woman who suddenly shows up in town and becomes Emma’s soul mate.

“Tara’s amazing in this movie,” says the veteran actress who starred on Broadway with Jessica Lange in 2005. “She’s just so emotionally available and raw and 100 percent. I loved working with her.”

Paulson points out that that during a particularly poignant scene, where her Merrill character is sharing feelings about her past she has never shared before, “I didn’t have to act really. I could just be there and look at those beautiful eyes. She was just so available and sweet. In that scene, when I’m crying by the pool and I’m recounting the story of my mother’s suicide, she wipes away my tear. Nobody told her to do that. It wasn’t in the script that I was going to cry at that moment. She’s just so instinctual.”

Gallagher says she was awed by working with such blue-ribbon talent as two-time Tony Award-winner Cherry Jones, Paulson, Shawn Hatosy and Robert Knott. “The other actors were all fantastic, and I just felt like I had to keep up my game,” she says. “I had to live up to all these great names, and I just wanted to do my best to impress everybody. It was very exciting working with them, because they would give me lots of tips and pointers and stuff, and advice. It was just very helpful.”

Gallagher, now 13 years old, is an only child whose parents divorced when she was really young. She lives with her father, a Manhattan hair stylist, in Rutherford, New Jersey, but also spends time with her mother, a mortgage broker, in North Bergen.

Prior to moving to New Jersey full-time, Gallagher lived in Manhattan with her mom and attended the Tribeca Learning Center from kindergarten through 5th grade. “This school was just phenomenal. It was just a fantastic school with amazing teachers,” she says.

It was at TLC, soon after she completed filming on “Swimmers,” that Gallagher was selected to appear in “Mad Hot Ballroom” when the producers chose her school as one of those to be featured. Surprisingly, Gallagher became one of the showcased competitors, even though her only prior dance experience was a year of ballet lessons at the age of six.

Disarmingly mature for her age, she credits her parents creative natures for leading her into acting. “My mom is a very creative person. So is my dad. They opened my eyes to a lot of things that most children would be deprived from – and I’m just so grateful for it, because it made me turn out like a better person.”

She notes how her mother, who had taken a few drama lessons in high school, “would just say to me out outgoing and how dramatic I was,” Gallagher says with a smile.

At the age of eight, Gallagher’s uncle, Patrick Lewis, a professional photographer, took headshots of her and sent them to the Ford Modeling Agency. During her initial audition, they asked if she had any special talents to show them. Gallagher said she could sing, but instead of the usual “Happy Birthday” kids typically perform, she belted out “Fallen” by Alicia Keys. “I started singing it and like the whole room got like quiet. It was really funny,” she recalls with a laugh.

Although Gallagher had had some singing lessons and spent a year performing in the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, she says her “vocal training was just like me singing in the shower all the time, you know? My mom used to sing a lot.”

Ford recommended her to a top talent agency, which signed her up immediately. Gallagher’s first professional break came in a Chucky Cheese commercial. “It was a great commercial to shoot because all we had to do basically was just have fun.” She also filmed a spot for Huggies, but got left on the editing floor because they decided she was too old to be giving advice to younger children about potty training, and Target.

Her first speaking part was in an on-air promo for the PBS children’s animation series, “Sagwa,” in which she was asked to share an experience related to the moral lessons in the show. She’s also been interviewed on HBO’s “My Favorite Book,” and was part of a reading for the play, “The Children’s Hour.”

Despite Gallagher’s lack of formal training, Sarah Paulson points out that “Tara is a born actress. She’s the real deal, and I suspect that if she wants it, she can have a really beautiful career.”

* * *



SARAH PAULSON

Biography

“What I found with Sarah is that she has an amazing ability to shift gears and do multiple things at the same time,” says “Swimmers” director-writer Doug Sadler. “She brought the depth, complexity and dangerous seductiveness to the Merrill character that I was looking for. As an actress, she is wildly gifted and able to turn on a dime.”

In “Swimmers,” Sarah Paulson tackles her most challenging film role to date as the mysterious, Kohl-eyed beauty who suddenly turns up in town in a desperate attempt to understand her own emotionally-troubled past.

As the story unfolds, she and 11-year-old Emma Tyler – who is shattered by her own recent loss – form a delicate bond that becomes their sanctuary from the personal crises that threaten to drown both. As Merrill becomes an oasis for Emma, who feels invisible at home, she in turn finds herself growing ever dependent on the unconditional friendship the child provides.

“Merrill and Emma are very similar, despite their ages. They’re kindred spirits who find each other – because Emma lives underwater, and so does Merrill essentially, and they sort of end up being breathing tubes for each other,” says Paulson.

The role required a physical as well as emotional transformation for the enigmatic character. “This is the first movie I ever did where I literally wore no makeup, except for a little bit of eyeliner at the very beginning of the film. It was very important that I didn't look like

someone who spent a lot of time thinking about the way she looked. When you first see her, I have a lot of dark eye makeup on, and then as the movie goes on I have less and less of it. I didn't wear anything else," she explains.

A major emerging American talent, Paulson recently scored rave reviews as Jessica Lange's co-star in the Broadway revival of Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie."

USA Today called her a "revelation as Laura [Wingfield], as heartbreaking in her shyness and lack of self-regard as she is radiant in her generosity." The *New York Daily News* wrote that Paulson "conveys Laura's pain intensely and beautifully." And TheaterMania.com noted that "hers is a performance lit from deep within....Paulson is so affecting that, perhaps for the first time, Williams' early masterpiece becomes Laura's story."

Working with Lange was "pretty much the most exquisite experience of my life. Jessica Lange is my absolute acting idol," Paulson says, pointing out that she is such a fan that she has long had a "Frances" poster hanging on her bedroom wall in Los Angeles.

Paulson says she never dreamed she'd one day be "acting on Broadway with her. *And* doing a Tennessee Williams' play, playing the most beautiful, heartbreaking part imaginable. It's the kind of thing that when we were done, I thought, 'Oh, I wish we could just go right back into rehearsal and I could start again. That's the great thing about a play. The more you do it, the more you can actually try to perfect something, the better it can be, and it's just really exciting."

In another enviable stage turn, Paulson will co-star with Annette Bening in the Mark Taper Forum production of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" in the spring of 2006.

Born in Tampa, Paulson's parents divorced when she was two. Then, when she was five, her mother moved her two daughters to New York to start her life over.

"My mom was 27 years old. She didn't know a single person in New York City. She got a job at Sardi's Restaurant. We lived in Queens briefly on a mattress on the floor, and then we moved to Gramercy Park. We lived on West 11th Street for a long time, which is now like the hippest place," Paulson says.

"She was so brave to be basically a debutante in Tampa, Florida, having a cotillion and a coming out ball – and she picked up and brought her two kids to the greatest city in the world, not knowing anyone. My mom's kind of my hero that way."

How did Paulson get into acting? "Oh, God, I feel like I've always done it," she says with

a laugh. “It was in the fourth grade, and I was in a program in Florida. We moved back and forth, my sister and I – between seeing my father, who remained in Florida, and my mother in New York – and I just was always in theater programs.”

While attending PS29 in New York, Paulson twice appeared in the annual city-wide production sponsored by Jacques d’Amboise’s National Dance Institute. After transferring to a private school in Park Slope, Brooklyn, she appeared in more plays. “And then somebody told me I could go to a high school where I could take five hours of acting classes a day. I wanted to know about that promptly, and I auditioned for it and got in.”

The school was the famed High School for the Performing Arts – for which 3,000 kids auditioned for the drama department alone, out of which only 60 (including Paulson) were accepted.

She graduated in 1993, and her first big break came only six months later – as an understudy in the Broadway production of Wendy Wasserstein’s Tony Award-winning “The Sisters Rosensweig,” starring Jane Alexander and Madeline Kahn. “I was barely 19 years old, and all my friends had gone off to college while I stayed in New York and was trying to get a job.”

The following year, Paulson landed a guest appearance on “Law & Order,” followed by a role in the world premiere of Horton Foote’s “Talking Pictures” on off-off-Broadway. Returning to television in 1995, she co-starred with Kathleen Turner in the Hallmark movie, “Friends At Last,” then received her first big break, as a series regular in the CBS thriller, “American Gothic.”

She has since starred in three other primetime series – the WB’s “Jack & Jill” (1999-2001), NBC’s “Leap of Faith” (2002; as the lead), and ABC’s “The D.A.” (2004) – as well as a recurring role on HBO’s “Deadwood” (2005).

Since making her motion picture debut in “Levitation” in 1997, Paulson was Juliette Lewis’ sibling in Garry Marshall’s “The Other Sister” with Diane Keaton, Mel Gibson’s secretary in “What Women Want,” and Renee Zellweger’s frenetic book editor sidekick in the Rock Hudson-Doris Day style comedy, “Down With Love,” among other roles.

Meanwhile, she has returned often to her stage roots – including in the 1998 off-Broadway hit, “Killer Joe,” with Scott Glenn and Amanda Plummer, where “Swimmers” casting director Ellen Parks first spotted her.

“When Doug was going through the names of people and casting people, Ellen said to Doug, ‘I think there’s an actress you should really meet,’” she remembers hearing, adding that

Sadler later told her that the moment he saw her head shot, he had a strong feeling it was going to be her. “He didn’t know why, but it was just a strong feeling.”

When the offer to play Merrill came through, “I said yes, and we went off to the eastern shore, where we were hit with a hurricane. We lost half the dock where we were supposed to be shooting. The land where the Tyler house sat was completely flooded. It was just – anything that could go wrong on this movie did go wrong while we were shooting. It was really wild,” she says with a laugh.

Paulson is particularly taken with the “Swimmers” cinematography. “Rodney Taylor, to me, is like the most untapped, divine cinematographer. The movie looks so beautiful. I wish he could shoot everything I ever did.”

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