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**DON'T
LOOK
BACK
IN
ANGER**

Sam Taylor-Johnson
The artist and
film director on
alcoholism, cancer,
being abandoned by
her parents — and
finding happiness



“I drank to blackout most nights. I thought I was a cool artist, but I was an alcoholic”

Sam Taylor-Johnson

Artist and film director

THE
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INTERVIEW
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Elton John once said that if he were straight, Sam Taylor-Johnson was the woman with whom he would want to spend his life. When she had cancer, her friend Damien Hirst appeared on her doorstep with a very personal gift of his own most precious childhood belongings, including his first school report and letters from his mother. “I think he was saying, ‘These mean a lot to me, you mean a lot to me — I want to put them together,’” she says. And the teenage Aaron Taylor-Johnson fell so in love with her that he married her, despite the fact that she is 23 years his senior.

Over the years, I’ve interviewed many people who have waxed lyrical about how much they love Taylor-Johnson. But before meeting her, it was hard to fathom what it is that so captivates them. In photographs she can look severe. She does not court approval; quite the opposite. She burst into our national consciousness nearly a quarter of a century ago with a photograph of herself with her trousers round her ankles and a T-shirt sporting an obscene slogan, which helped propel her to the forefront of the Young British Artists.

Since then she has been both eulogised and criticised for her artwork — with some saying she epitomised the YBA zeitgeist and others that she relied too heavily on the celebrity circles in which she moved (think David Beckham sleeping in her 2004 video portrait for the National Portrait Gallery, or Daniel Craig weeping in her *Crying Men* series in 2003). Her more recent incarnation as a movie director has also divided opinion. Her last film was 2015’s controversial *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the sadomasochistic erotic drama based on the bestselling book. For Taylor-Johnson, a self-proclaimed feminist and mother of four young daughters (two with her first husband, Jay Jopling, founder of the White Cube gallery, and two with Aaron), it seemed an odd choice.

We meet at an old Hollywood mansion booked for the photoshoot, where she greets me like an old friend.

“We’ve met before, haven’t we?” she asks warmly (we haven’t). “But you look so familiar.” It’s the same with everyone: “I love your shoes!” she tells the make-up artist. Catching sight of the photographer’s partner, Taylor-Johnson clocks her barely perceptible baby bump. “This is always a risky question but — are you having a baby? You are! A girl! In July! I have a July baby, they are the best, mine has the sunniest disposition.”

She uses the same skills on set, most recently directing the upcoming Netflix drama series *Gypsy*, which stars Naomi Watts as a therapist who stalks her patients. “I’ve been told I have a famously happy and calm set. I know every grip’s wife’s and kids’ names — so that they feel as important as Naomi. It’s not that different from having four kids and dogs and making sure the environment is always on an even-ish keel.”

We find a sunny side room in the house, with views over Los Angeles, and Taylor-Johnson sits on a maroon velvet sofa, legs crossed in a flexible yoga pose. Her hair is damp (she has just showered after an early-morning hike with Aaron) and she is wearing a denim shirt and striped Chloe trousers. Her fingers are festooned with rings — including her large wedding band, similar to the one Aaron wears.

Having read that she finds being interviewed like having root-canal surgery, I had not expected her to be so relaxed. She laughs: “Poor Aaron is having root-canal surgery so I feel bad saying that! I actually would prefer to be here.” Her whole demeanour softens whenever she refers to Aaron — which she does frequently. Considering the furore that has surrounded their relationship, one would forgive her for being defensive. But she is completely at ease: “I literally found my soulmate. I feel so blessed: every day I wake up happy.”

Back when she was married to Jopling she once said, perhaps only half-jokingly, that the secret to a good marriage was “Don’t compromise”. “I think I had to be like that then,” she laughs. Of that marriage, ➔

PHOTOGRAPH
AUSTIN HARGRAVE



AUSTIN HARGRAVE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. STYLING BY TARA NICHOLS. HAIR BY RYAN RICHMAN. MAKE-UP BY LUCY HALPERN. DRESS BY CHRISTIAN DIOR. HAT BY STETSON X BUCK MASON. EARRINGS BY DAVID YURMAN. EYEBALL RING BY LEOPOD DORE.

“With the benefit of hindsight, would I go through *Fifty Shades of Grey* again? Of course I wouldn’t. I’d be mad”

she just says: “It was great on paper. I’m in a very different place now.”

Do she and Aaron compromise easily? “We don’t need to — if you saw us together, we’re in such sync. We spend every minute of the day together. My friends call him Benjamin Button because he has — on the outside — such youth, and on the inside, he is so wise and settled. He doesn’t like parties. He likes being at home and cooking for the family. He likes walking the dogs. He loves his chickens — he collects the eggs and makes breakfast for everyone.”

The subtext, of course, is that the age difference is meaningless. While Aaron, who turns 27 on Tuesday, is an “old soul”, Taylor-Johnson, 50, “tries to pretend to be a grown-up”. This morning, she says, she had a strong urge to dye her hair bright pink. She resisted. Instead each one of her fingernails is painted a different colour, like a six-year-old let loose in a nail salon.

Both their Instagram feeds are strewn with declarations of their love. Aaron recently posted a picture of them kissing, with the caption “So blessed to have this one by my side”, as well as a photo of his torso with “Sam” tattooed over his heart. It sounds like a fairy tale: “It is,” she replies. “He is an amazing man.”

They nearly did not meet. In 2008, Taylor-Wood — as she then was — was looking for an actor to play John Lennon in *Nowhere Boy*, her directorial feature-film debut. Aaron Johnson — as he then was — could only audition on a day when she was unavailable. At first, Taylor-Johnson said no. She had just split from Jopling and was moving out of their marital home that very day. “It was so inconvenient. In the end I was like, ‘OK, he’ll have to come to my home.’ I opened my door to John Lennon. I instantly knew he was the guy.”

Did they fall in love on set? “I wasn’t thinking that way, but we had this intense connection: I could tell by the twitch of an eyelash whether he was focused or not.” It was Aaron who took the initiative in their relationship: “He was very intense and absolutely mind made-up.” The age gap gave her a fleeting moment of hesitation, “but it wasn’t long. Aaron was, ‘Have no fear.’”

The couple announced their engagement at the film’s 2009 premiere and had their first daughter — Wylda Rae — the following year, when Taylor-Johnson was 43 and Aaron 20. Their second daughter, Romy Hero, was born in 2012 and they married that summer, combining their names as Taylor-Johnson. Now they live in a 1920s Spanish house in the

Hollywood Hills. They get on well with Jopling, spending time together on holiday. “We were in New York recently for Jay’s mother’s 80th and we all went for tea together: Aaron, Jay, Jay’s parents, all the kids.”

We discuss the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who has a similar age gap with his wife, Brigitte. He is now 39 to her 64 years — and their connection seems to have only deepened over time. “I see the same for us,” enthuses Taylor-Johnson. She refuses to get riled by the hypocrisies of a society that accepts relationships in which the man is much older: Donald Trump is 24 years older than his wife but no one raises an eyebrow. Even Jopling had a brief relationship with Lily Allen, 22 years his junior. Does Taylor-Johnson think society is becoming more open-minded when the genders are reversed? “Not really,” she shrugs. “Everyone has a perception of something that is so out of the norm.”

Not all her friends were supportive. “I could predict who was going to take a step back and who was going to say, ‘Are you happy? Great.’ I didn’t really care: people could have protested and I would have been, like, ‘whatever’. I was in it so deep. You may have noticed, I never care about anything that anyone says. I’ve always been fearless in my work and my relationships.”

It is an attitude that has its roots in her childhood, when she was abandoned first by her father, then her mother, leaving her accountable to nobody.

Born Samantha Taylor, she grew up in Streatham, south London, with her parents, Geraldine and David, and younger sister, Ashley. When she was nine, her father — an accountant for the Hell’s Angels, of all things — left to bike around the world and never came back. “Yes, I did mind, but I grew out of minding,” she says matter-of-factly. Her mother married a postman and they moved to Crowborough, East Sussex, where they lived in a hippie commune called Sunny Villa. “It should have been called Dark-as-Hell Villa,” she says.

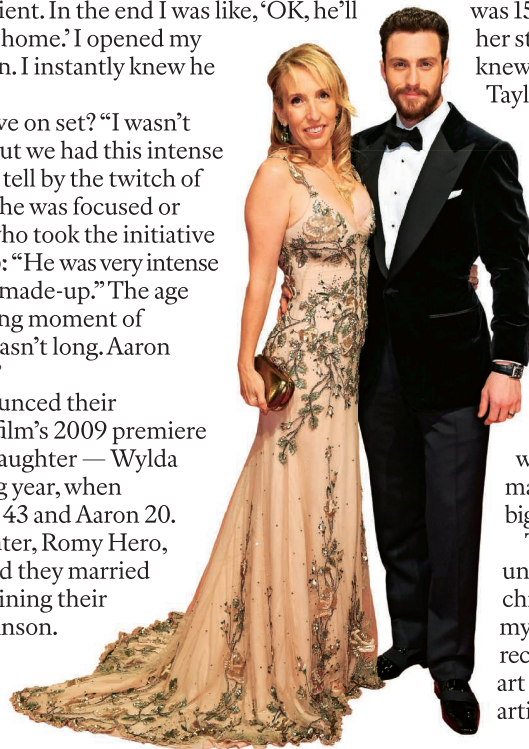
Her mother had a son with her new husband, whose surname was Wood, hence Taylor-Wood. When she

was 15, her mother handed her a note to give to her stepfather — then vanished, alone. No one knew where she had gone. A few months later,

Taylor-Johnson saw a blind go up in a nearby house and, to her astonishment, glimpsed her mother’s face. “We never talk about the past,” says Taylor-Johnson, who recently flew her mother to Los Angeles for her 70th birthday. “I’ve decided that the only way is to live in the moment.”

Maybe her mother never knew that she saw her in the window? “She does know because I went round there that night, banged on the door and insisted she open it.” Did she? “No, she talked through the letterbox.” She laughs weakly. “I don’t understand, but parents do make mistakes.” Pause. “Still, that was quite a big mistake.”

Taylor-Johnson stood out at school. “My uniform was covered in cat shit and hairs and chicken poo. But I managed somehow to talk my way into all circles.” An art teacher recognised her talent and helped her get into art college, where she went out with the artist Jake Chapman. After college she →



DREAM TEAM
With her actor husband, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, at the Baftas at the Royal Albert Hall in February

drifted, working as a dresser at the Royal Opera House, which she loved, and as manager of the Camden Palace nightclub, which she hated. “I was depressed. I saw that T-shirt” — it bore the slogan F*** Suck Spank W*** — “and it was exactly how I felt. I took a photograph of myself in it and suddenly the whole world opened up. I realised I didn’t have to present things in a way that was palatable, I could say whatever I thought. And I’ve stuck with that,” she chuckles. “Although sometimes I think I should shut my mouth a bit.”

In 1997 she was awarded Most Promising Young Artist at the Venice Biennale; in 1998 she was nominated for the Turner prize. By then she had met Jopling, an old Etonian. “Being an artist is like a passport across every class and boundary. I was riding the crest of a really high wave... and he was at the epicentre of all that.”

Together they became one of the art world’s most powerful couples, throwing fabulous parties at their Georgian house in Marylebone. But Taylor-Johnson remembers little about those years. “I would drink to blackout most nights,” she says. “I thought it was because I was a cool British artist, but actually I was quite a mess. I would say I was an alcoholic. I put myself in supremely dangerous situations.”

Shortly after giving birth to her first child, Angelica, she was diagnosed with cancer and had a foot and a half of her colon removed. She recovered, only to be struck down by breast cancer three years later. She had a mastectomy and reconstruction of her left breast and again rebounded — with 2001’s witty *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare* (a reference to hair loss during chemotherapy). But this time she knew she had to make some changes. “I stopped drinking, I stopped partying, I calmed down.”

Increasingly interested in film, she directed an eight-minute short, *Death Valley*, in 2006, which featured a cowboy masturbating in the desert. I tried to watch it, but even eight minutes was too long, so I fast-forwarded to the (inevitable) end. Her next attempt was in a different class altogether. Teaming up with Anthony Minghella, she directed the short film *Love You More* (2008). Edgy and touching, it won several awards. Her confidence boosted, she lobbied hard for *Nowhere Boy*. “I am persuasive. I’m also a bit of a dog with a bone and I won’t take no for an answer.”

The film — which delves into a teenage Lennon’s complex relationship with two older women in his life, his aunt and his mother — was well received, although surprisingly conventional given its director. What prompted her to pitch for *Fifty Shades* next? “It felt like a very dysfunctional fairy tale: a controlling prince and an unsuspecting young village girl. What I wanted to achieve is [for her] to usurp him against the odds.”

We discuss the scene towards the end, where the girl — played by Dakota Johnson — invites Christian Grey to “punish” her with six painful lashes. “The idea was she would hold a mirror to his darkness and come out with the power.” Hmm. I’m not sure teenage girls watching in their local cineplex picked up those nuances. Wasn’t it just normalising that sort of relationship?

“That’s like saying I am responsible for people going into the world of S&M.” She sighs. “It was a struggle and there were lots of onset tête-à-têtes, with me trying to bat it into the [right] place.”

Dakota Johnson told me that Taylor-Johnson created a “very safe protected environment” on set: “I trusted her completely,” she said. “Bless her,” says Taylor-Johnson. “She texted yesterday saying, ‘I miss you.’”



Most problematic was the unusual control that the author, EL James, had negotiated over the movie. Director and author clashed. “I like everyone — and I get really confused when they don’t like me. I was so confused by EL James. I don’t understand when I can’t navigate a person, when there’s no synergy.”

Having once said she could talk anyone into anything, it seemed she had met her match. She did not take on the sequels. Did she see the second one? “I’m not going to ever watch them. I have literally zero interest,” she says. Does she regret doing the movie? “I can never say I regret it because that would just finish me off.” I try another tack: given her time again, would she take it on? “With the benefit of hindsight would I go through it again? Of course I wouldn’t. I’d be mad.”

Her next project promises to be more rewarding. After years of saying they want to work together on another movie, she and Aaron have secured the rights for a film adaptation of a bestselling book. She will not tell me the title, but drops a few clues: it was written by a male American author more than a decade ago, has adult content and is very well known. Aaron will play the lead and Taylor-Johnson will direct it. “I’m so excited,” she says. “The author told me, ‘I don’t care what you do with it, I’ll see you at the finish line.’”

On her iPhone, which is slightly cracked, she shows me an advertisement she has just directed introducing Aaron as the face of a Givenchy men’s scent. It is slick and witty, timeless in black and white. “It’s a really good partnership,” she says of the way they work together.

The same, of course, can be said of their personal partnership. They have been together nearly a decade now, defying all the naysayers. She says she has stopped noticing the age gap. “When you’re solid with someone in your own love, you don’t think about it.”

Now running late for a screening of Aaron’s new movie, *The Wall*, she races down the driveway to meet her driver. The caretaker of the house is there, insisting that the car pull into the turnaround at the top, a pointless palaver that will lose her valuable minutes. “You can’t do that,” he remonstrates as she opens the car door. “Why not?” asks Taylor-Johnson sweetly. He capitulates good-naturedly. In truth, he has no choice ■

Gypsy starts on Netflix on June 30



THE EX FACTOR
Above: with her first husband, the gallerist Jay Jopling. Top right: *Self Portrait in a Single Breasted Suit with Hare*, 2001

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