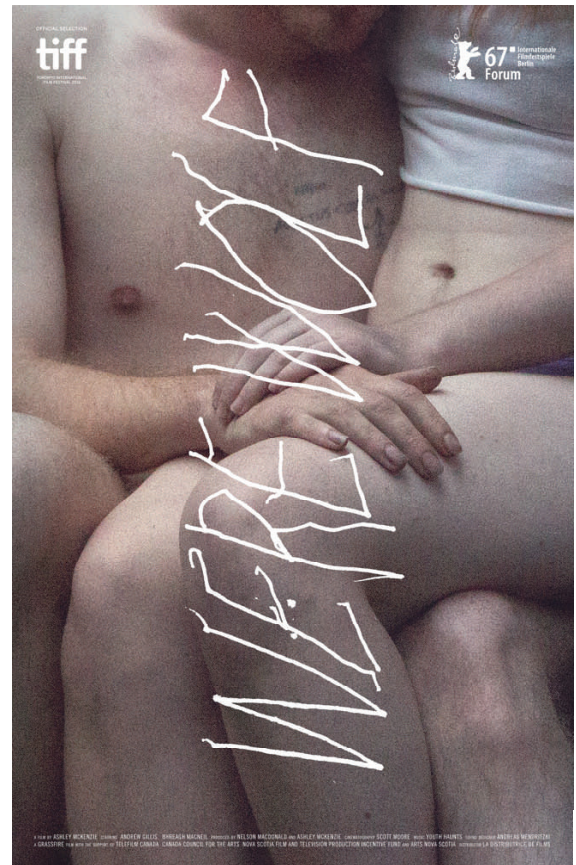
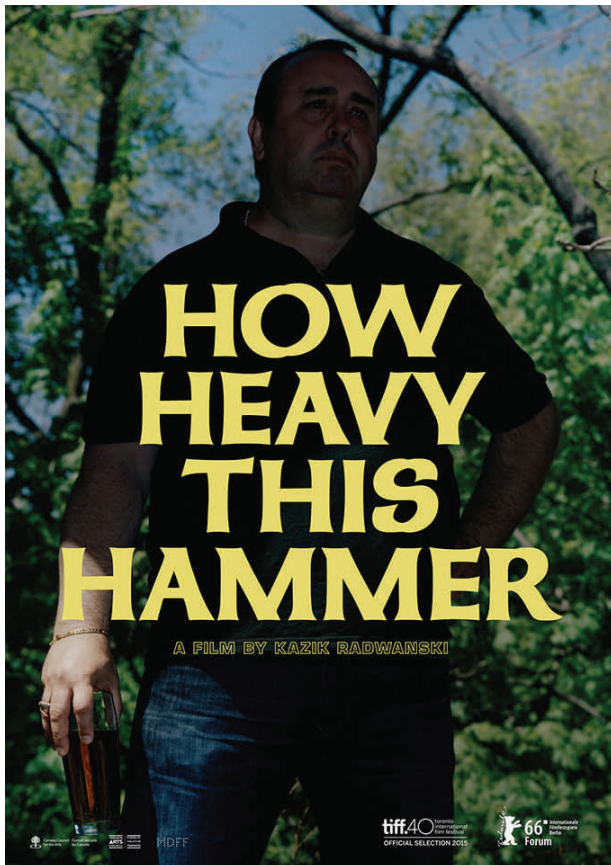


Acropolis Cinema presents



New Canadian Independents:
How Heavy This Hammer & Werewolf

December 12, 2017 ~ 7:30pm ~ Downtown Independent

ABOUT THE FILMS

Over the past half-decade, Canadian independent filmmaking has experienced a resurgence. Working outside traditional funding channels, a constellation of new directors from across the country have emerged with unique styles and sensibilities, distinct in their regional specificities while standing firmly at the vanguard of new cinematic storytelling possibilities.

Two of the most notable names to have arisen from this movement, Toronto's Kazik Radwanski and Nova Scotia's Ashley McKenzie, have each recently produced films that have earned an uncommon amount of international attention. Upon its premiere at TIFF, Radwanski's second feature, *How Heavy This Hammer*, a modest portrait of a Bulgarian immigrant who one day decides to leave his wife and explore the frontiers of middle-age dating and single-parent living, instantly solidified the filmmaker as this new generation's most gifted and empathetic curator of everyday domestic travails.

No less attuned to the subtle gradations of the human condition, McKenzie, with her feature debut *Werewolf*—a vividly realized romantic tragedy following two young addicts living on the margins of New Waterford that has picked up numerous awards as it traveled across North America and Europe—has announced herself as an equally uncompromising chronicler of emotional and psychological trauma. Together the work of these two young directors speaks not only to the exciting developments in Canadian independent filmmaking, but to the breadth of contemporary cinematic invention as a whole.

How Heavy This Hammer (Kazik Radwanski, Canada, 75 min, 2015)

Werewolf (Ashley McKenzie, Canada, 80 min, 2016)

Uncomfortably Numb: An Interview with Kazik Radwanski by Jordan Cronk

The following is an excerpt of an interview originally published by Reverse Shot

Jordan Cronk: I'm curious what draws you to characters so seemingly dissimilar from yourself.

Kazik Radwanski: If I'm being totally honest, the films emerge from a very introspective place. A lot of Erwin's character is based on my own father, or catching a glimpse of my father at his worst. I had a pretty great dad, but everyone has their moments. Seeing my dad getting addicted to a video game, for example, was pretty fascinating for me. Erwin's an exaggerated version of that, but in many ways [his story] is extremely personal. It's almost embarrassingly introspective, so I really count on finding unique people, like Erwin, and then renegotiating it as a way to sort of ground the character. I'm really used to rethinking the character in the casting process. With Erwin there were so many things that I never would have written or planned for—his accent for instance. In fact, through the casting process my instinct was not to work with Erwin—maybe Belgium's just not a rugby-playing country, I don't know. But as I got to know him it started to morph into something different. So it's a mixture of something very personal and completely foreign. I like that juxtaposition.

JC: Your films have an intimate, somewhat casual feel to them. But I get the sense that they're thoroughly plotted. What is the writing process like?

KR: The screenplays for *Tower* and *Hammer* were quite different. It is true that they are quite plotted. I think if you look at the actual outlines for the films they stay pretty true to the initial treatment. *Hammer* was the closest to a conventional screenplay, in that it was 70 or 80 pages of script. But *Tower* was just a skeleton of a screenplay. I mostly just wrote scene descriptions that I hoped to

fit into the film, knowing we would have to drop some. I was really afraid with my first feature of writing a screenplay and getting overwhelmed in the production and then just falling back on a mediocre screenplay. But with *Hammer* I was more confident, and it was always very plotted in the sense that I always separated it into three acts throughout the writing process. Not that it's a conventional three-act structure, more that I always imagined there would be three parts: a period when Erwin is in the marriage, a period when he's not living at home, and then the final sequence, when he visits the family at the end. But the words written in the script are really just for my reference. I never show the actors the screenplay. I find I always get better results with the dialogue if we do some improvisation and run through the scene a few times. And then once I find the tone that I like I'll insert some lines.

JC: Can you talk about how your visual style—close-ups, shallow focus, handheld camera work—has developed?

KR: The elephant in the room when I was in film school was, you know, being too focused on camera and aesthetics and not thinking enough about performance. So I always felt like the camerawork and lighting and editing would evolve naturally, that it would be a skill that would progress. But I always wanted the actors to be at the fore of it. So that's why even with the early films it feels almost formal, like there's a rigor with it always being in close-up and always being focused on the actor. I like the feeling of always being so close to one person, especially when we're unsure why, or curious if there's a problem with this person. I like that mystery of being so close to someone who probably doesn't want you to be that close to them. So there's this feeling of intimacy and authenticity and realism, but I also like the tension of the audience being uncomfortable with being so close to someone—to not allow such a privileged position, for the audience to have to somehow negotiate that distance.

I think a lot of the aesthetic choices are ways for me not to get too distracted with the camera. I've always thought of the camera as pretty practical, especially since there are so many variables when shooting with digital. When I started making my early films it was around that turning point where a lot of film students were still shooting on film—it was a real question whether to shoot on film or digital. And I thought because of the digital we should be shooting in close-up. It's so much more visually pleasing. And when you shoot wide there are just so many other considerations.

JC: It may be impossible to talk about the whole of Canada, but as far as in Toronto, are you guys aware of the growing visibility of your independent filmmaking scene, and have the well-documented funding issues currently plaguing the country affected your work at all ?

KR: [As far as the scene,] it's great, especially within English Canada. There have always been great French Canadian films, with pretty consistent waves of young filmmakers, with everyone from Denis Villeneuve to Denis Côté to Xavier Dolan. So French cinema was always a bit of a distant influence on me, in as much as wanting English Canadian cinema to be as good as that, or at least feel of similar importance. [But] you can look at it a few different ways. For me, I know a lot of U.S. filmmakers who have access to a lot less funding than I do. We do have a great arts council system, which funded my first two features. *Tower* had a budget of about \$40,000, and *Hammer* was about \$70,000 or \$80,000, which for a lot of people is a small amount of money, but for me is a huge amount of money, more than I could ever personally invest in a film or even begin to ask for via Kickstarter. So I've always welcomed that, and considered it a huge advantage to living in Canada. But at the same time, there is a lot of funding going through Telefilm—they spend one hundred million per year on what sometimes feels like just a handful of directors. So it's a funny debate, the state of Canadian cinema, which always turns into a long, painful argument. A lot actually has changed in the past year: Telefilm made an announcement that now 50% of its funding will now go toward female directors, which seems like a really healthy step. And now there's a real bedrock. It feels like a turning point that we're all around the same age, and [we've] all [already] made these films without the help of our major national funding body. ♦

Werewolf by Adam Nayman

The following article was originally published by Cinema Scope

The title's a metaphor, of course. New Waterford-based Ashley McKenzie's feature debut, after a string of sterling shorts, tracks two methadone-swigging wastrels whose chemical dependencies have them eking out a feral existence in small-town Nova Scotia. The narrative materials are generic—plenty of down-in-the-mouth Canadiana out there—but the filmmaking is vivid and specific. Smart visual choices abound: close-cropped Blais (Andrew Gillis) is introduced as a man literally at the end of his rope; his girlfriend Nessa (Bhreagh MacNeil) crumbles Oreos in an ice-cream shop contraption suggesting a Sisyphean cycle; a burdensome bit of equipment lugged to and fro makes the production's debt to *Rosetta* (1999) and *L'enfant* (2005) clear. What McKenzie is really borrowing from the Dardennes, though, is not the spare, festival-ready aesthetic—which is actually closer to Lucrecia Martel's stylized sound design and bisected bodies—but a genuinely materialist sensibility, minus any traces of the brothers' redemptive spirituality. There's a bare minimum of junkie poetry here: addiction is not a tragic state of grace but just one more self-destructive compulsion among many, while the finely gradated interactions between the protagonists and different representatives of various institutional establishments place empathy and ambivalence side by side, where they belong.

A Generational Shift in Independent Filmmaking by Richard Brody

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by the New Yorker

Ashley McKenzie's first feature, *Werewolf*, isn't a horror movie in substance but in spirit. It's a drama about the virtual possession of souls and transformation of bodies caused by drug addiction, and McKenzie's miraculous filming of two young people in its grip is similarly poised at the boundary of bodies and souls. Filming on her home terrain of Cape Breton Island, working with nonprofessional actors whom she met there, filling out her cast with people she encountered on location or saw in passing in the street, McKenzie tells the story of a young couple, Blaise and Nessa, who live in an abandoned trailer while attempting to eke out a living mowing lawns and keep their addictions at bay by participating in their town's methadone program. Filming in a quiet place of rustic isolation, McKenzie narrows her scope of vision to discern and magnify tremors of an involuntary and unconscious power. She looks at Nessa and Blaise with an urgent intimacy that often bypasses facial expressions to isolate aspects of the body—including facial features, hand gestures, postures, or even tools and articles of clothing—that transmit emotions without declaring them. With the avidity and exaltation of her inventive and probing visual compositions, McKenzie breaks down familiar and overt representations to reveal their concealed and embedded essences. By way of a sure sense of behavior—from Blaise's exhausted collapse on a stony road to his belligerent negotiation with a mechanic, from Nessa's determined exertions with the mower to her effort to master the gestures and procedures of a new job—McKenzie fuses a documentary-like observational precision with a creative imagination that endows her characters' struggles with a quietly monumental grandeur. ♦

Upcoming Acropolis screenings:

Jan 9, 2018: *Occidental* (Neil Beloufa)—Downtown Independent



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