

# WOMAN ON TOP

How did a Hollywood novice who hadn't even read the book come to direct the film version of the mega-hit '50 Shades of Grey'? Sam Taylor-Johnson reveals all to **TIM WALKER**

Sam Taylor-Johnson is knackered. The day before our interview, the 47-year-old filmmaker finally finished the biggest job of her life, locking the last edit on her adaptation of *50 Shades of Grey*, one of the most hotly, sweatily awaited movies of 2015. The shoot was intense, the weight of expectation even more so: earlier in the day, it was announced that advance tickets have sold faster than for any other R-rated film in US box office history.

This morning, she says, she could barely lift her head off the pillow. But she managed to make it from her bed in the Hollywood Hills to the terrace of the Chateau Marmont hotel, where she is stoically chugging cups of hot water with honey, lemon and ginger. It's 18 months since Taylor-Johnson, who had never directed a Hollywood movie, was hired for the film version of EL James's mega-selling erotic novel. The news was announced the day after she made her pitch to executives at Focus Features and Universal, who had won a fierce bidding war for the rights to *50 Shades*.

"I went in for the meeting, and I thought they liked my vision and approach," she recalls. "But the call came at eight o'clock the next morning: 'OK, you got the job - we're announcing it at midday.' It was like jumping onto a high-speed train and the doors locking behind me. And I'm only now about to get off... I'm not that seasoned a director, and I had a few moments when I thought, 'This is way bigger than I can handle.' But I'm also not a quitter."

The level of security surrounding the film is such that no journalist was permitted to watch it ahead of its Berlin premiere on 11 February. For Taylor-Johnson, that secrecy is a source of frustration. "I haven't been able to show it to anyone," she says. "It's the most frustrating thing ever to not be able to get feedback." One of the few people to have seen it is her husband, actor Aaron Taylor-Johnson: "Aaron has seen it a thousand times. He worked on it from the script right through. I needed someone that I could trust to bounce ideas off."

Despite the studio's cloak-and-dagger release strategy, the book's many fans can rest assured that the *50 Shades* plot remains intact. Jamie Dornan plays the titular Christian Grey, a business magnate with a BDSM habit, while Dakota Johnson is his unsuspecting love interest, Anastasia Steele. James, a regular presence on the set, was rigorously protective of her material.

That said, some of the novel's graphic sexual details were necessarily omitted from the film. Dornan recently told an interviewer that his "todger" was contractually obliged to remain off-camera, while an infamous episode from the book, commonly referred to as "The Tampon Scene", will not make it to the screen. "Those scenes had to be about sexuality and sensuality,

but you can't film it exactly the way it is on the page," the director admits. "Although, to their credit, Focus and Universal left me alone and said, 'Shoot it exactly how you want it, and we'll edit it if we need to.'"

Working within the Hollywood studio system was a new experience for someone who, by her own admission, has spent most of her career as an auteur. Taylor-Johnson (formerly Taylor-Wood) first achieved prominence as a photographer and video artist, one of the celebrated YBAs - Young British Artists - of the 1990s. She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1998, shortly after undergoing treatment for colon cancer. She overcame a bout of breast cancer two years later.

The Londoner's first foray into narrative film-making was the short *Love You More*, with Andrea Riseborough and Harry Treadaway as teenage lovers bonding over a mutual adoration for the Buzzcocks. It debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008, the same year Taylor-Johnson's YBA contemporary Steve McQueen was there to unveil his first feature, *Hunger*. "Steve and I were both on the red carpet at Cannes," she recalls, "and I said to him, over-excitedly, 'God, look at us! Isn't this so ridiculously exciting!' Steve just looked at me like I was some stupid schoolgirl. He shamed me with his look! He was definitely born to be a great director."

The following year, she directed another musical coming-of-age tale, the wonderful drama *Nowhere Boy*, starring Aaron Taylor-Johnson (formerly Johnson) as the young John Lennon. The director and the actor, who was 19 at the time, fell in love and announced their engagement at the film's 2009 premiere. They have since had two children, while Taylor-Johnson also has two older children from her first marriage, to art dealer Jay Jopling.



When you make a film like this, everything becomes a double entendre



Naked ambition: (clockwise from top right) Sam Taylor-Johnson; Jamie Dornan in '50 Shades of Grey'; Taylor-Johnson with Dornan on set MARY MCCARTNEY / UNIVERSAL PICTURES; PACIFIC COAST NEWS / BARCROFT MEDIA





She first got word of the project on the press tour for her husband's 2012 film *Anna Karenina*, while making small talk with the CEO of Focus. She hadn't read the book, but was aware of the growing *50 Shades* phenomenon. "He said they'd acquired the rights, and I thought, 'Wow, that's a challenge for someone to direct. It would be interesting to try to pull it off cinematically, to make it mainstream but dark, romantic but fucked-up.'"

The casting process was subject to frenzied speculation and some incredibly wishful thinking by Ryan Gosling fans, but the film-makers always planned to pick two relative unknowns. Dakota Johnson – daughter of Don Johnson and Melanie Griffith – aced her audition with a monologue from Ingmar Bergman's 1966 movie *Persona*. And after Taylor-Johnson had seen "hundreds of devastatingly handsome men", the title role eventually went to British actor Charlie Hunnam.

Weeks later, however, Hunnam pulled out, saying the shoot would come too hot on the heels of his TV drama, *Sons of Anarchy*, for him to comfortably segue into Christian Grey. "50's going to be massive," he told *US Weekly*. "I really didn't want to fail on such a grand scale."

For Taylor-Johnson, the news came as a blow. "Charlie and I were working really well together," she says. "But signing up for one film is very different from signing up for a trilogy. As the process got bigger, I started to sense his fear. On the day he called me to say that he just couldn't do it, I knew it was coming, but it was very sad. But then, I truly believe Jamie was meant to be Christian Grey – so, things work out for a reason."

Casting Christian was not simply a case of finding a suitable actor, she adds, but someone "who could carry the weight of what would come next... Jamie has so much humour, and nothing seems to bother him or penetrate his psyche too deeply. He seems to take everything and roll with it – so to speak." She chuckles, and then checks herself: "When you make a film like this, everything becomes a double entendre."

To prepare for the film's BDSM scenes, Taylor-Johnson consulted a professional dominatrix, whose client list was largely composed of millionaire businessmen like Christian Grey. "I learned a lot from her," she says. "Particularly about how the world of BDSM is incredibly strict and structured. There are lists of things you can and cannot do; a contract that you sign. Once you sign the contract, you know your parameters. That takes you to a place of intense trust, and to an incredible bond, which can turn into quite a powerful love."

For some readers, *50 Shades of Grey* was reportedly an effective masturbatory aid. Might the film have the same effect? "The sex scenes are pretty intense, so I'm sure people are going to feel aroused – but I've seen them so many times that I tend to forget," Taylor-Johnson replies.

"I recently had to go to Beyoncé's house to get her approval to use a song over a sex scene, and I just switched it on without really thinking. And then I suddenly realised, having a fresh pair of eyes, that actually it was pretty hardcore and explicit, and there I was sitting with someone I'd never met in my life, of whom I've always been a fan, and I needed her approval. I thought, 'Dear God, this is so embarrassing.' I was in a cold sweat as the thing played out. There was total silence, and then Beyoncé turned to me and said, 'That was hot.'"

Making *50 Shades* has been an all-consuming experience, and not one that Taylor-Johnson is in a hurry to repeat. Her husband has tickets to the basketball tonight and, as our interview comes to an end, she's clearly buoyed by the prospect of rest and relaxation. "I had a few days off last week and I shot a video for *The Weeknd*, who wrote the song for the end titles of the movie," she says. "What was great about it was that no one was overseeing us, it was just he and I making a video together. That was so much fun – it felt like being an artist again. ●

'50 Shades of Grey' is released on 13 February

# LABOUR OF LOVE GETS THE VOTE

'The Absence of War', David Hare's play about Labour's ill-fated 1992 election campaign, caused outrage when it premiered. Now it's beginning a timely revival. By **DANIEL ROSENTHAL**

On 14 April 2010, three weeks before the general election, David Hare was on stage for a Platform talk at the Lyttelton Theatre and spoke of a frustrating failure. His play *The Absence of War*, premiered in the Olivier in 1993, had fictionalised Labour's doomed 1992 election campaign, which ended with John Major still in No 10, and was followed by Neil Kinnock's resignation as party leader, and, under John Smith and Tony Blair, the birth of New Labour. Hare told his Platform audience that he had been unable to convince any producing theatre to revive *The Absence of War* for the 2010 poll: "It is about the roots of New Labour and, now that we assume New Labour is coming to an end in three weeks' time, it would be fantastic to show that play."

In 2015, with Labour again intent on ousting a Tory Prime Minister, Hare's wish has belatedly come true: *The Absence of War* opens at the Crucible, Sheffield, on Friday, and will then tour, finishing in Bath two days after the election.

This co-production between Headlong, Sheffield Theatres and the Rose, Kingston, is directed by Headlong's artistic director, Jeremy Herrin, who says that when he told Hare he wanted to mount this pre-election tour, the dramatist was "overjoyed". Herrin did not see *The Absence of War* when it concluded Hare's state-of-the-nation trilogy, after *Racing Demon* (Cottesloe, 1990) and *Murmuring Judges* (Olivier, 1991) had explored, respectively, the Anglican Church and the criminal justice system – all three staged by then NT Director Richard Eyre.

Hare and Eyre were both friends with Kinnock, who had enjoyed *Racing Demon* and *Murmuring Judges*, and knew that both dramas had emerged from Hare's interviews with clergy, solicitors, barristers, police and prison officers. So, when the playwright sought privileged access to Labour's 1992 campaign, Kinnock said yes, on the understanding, as Hare put it, "[that] I wasn't literally going to put people on the stage."

Hare attended Labour rallies and press conferences, and private meetings involving Kinnock and, among others, Roy Hattersley (Shadow Home Secretary), Gerald Kaufman (Shadow Foreign Secretary), and strategists Philip Gould and Patricia Hewitt. Hattersley



Red alert: John Thaw in 'The Absence of War' in 1993 RICHARD MILDENHALL/ARENA PAL

said Labour stood on the brink of an historic victory, but the Tories returned to power, albeit with a substantially reduced majority.

In *The Absence of War*, Hare presents Labour leader George Jones, who, although a bachelor from London, rather than a married Welshman, resembles Kinnock in age (early fifties), socialist values and garrulous wit; both men adore theatre. Jones and his team – including Shadow Chancellor, Deputy Leader, chief-of-staff and an advertising executive, Lindsay Fontaine, hired to re-brand the party – face a snap election called by Tory PM Charles Kendrick.

Just as Kinnock's closest advisers pressured him to forgo what author and former Labour press officer Francis Beckett has called "the simple, direct, passionate language that won hearts", apparently fearful that he might "bungle if let out without a leash", so Jones' advisers believe they can eliminate electoral risk by ensuring that "George... learns his lines and he sticks to them". Their promising campaign falters after a TV interviewer ambushes Jones with leaked information about his party's manifesto. The Tories go on to win.

With John Thaw as Jones, *The Absence of War* was set to open in October 1993, but that September its rehearsals were overshadowed by publicity surrounding Hare's research notebooks, which he distilled into *Asking Around: Background to the David Hare Trilogy*. An *Evening Standard* story headlined "Lefties v Luvvies" noted that Hare's access to Labour meetings had "seemed like a wonderful collaboration of art and politics. But now it has all gone sour". Gould and Hewitt refused "to sign clearance papers allowing their discussions" to appear in *Asking Around*, enabling the *Daily Mail* to run with "Kinnock aides accuse author of betrayal".

Reviewing a preview performance, Hattersley claimed the play depicted "the Kinnock of the gossip columns, not the Kinnock of real life". In a review for *The Independent*, Kaufman described certain scenes as "so accurate as to be positively gruesome"; Fontaine (played by Clare Higgins) was "strongly reminiscent" of Hewitt.

Eyre thought drama critics' generally "mealy-mouthed" response to Hare's writing in the play was "a classic journalistic confusion between documentary and art, between simile and metaphor", but Hare later admitted: "There could be no worse way of convincing people something is not documentary than to simultaneously publish a documentary book."

Kinnock found the play successful theatrically, but painful to watch: "It shows me as an arsehole." As Jones, Herrin has cast a Yorkshireman, Reece Dinsdale, who will play the Labour leader as Sheffield born and bred, to create further distance from Thaw's south Londoner. "We're opening in Sheffield," explains Herrin, "which is as good a place as any for Jones to come from: the nature of socialist politics is built into a city like Sheffield." ●

'The Absence of War', Crucible, Sheffield (0114 249 5999) Friday to 21 February; then tours to Norwich, Watford, Bristol, Cheltenham, Liverpool, Glasgow, Oxford, Kingston, Cambridge and Bath (headlong.co.uk)



After a period of "babies, family and the more important things in life", she returned to work – but, like any other business, show business proved difficult to break back into after motherhood. "I'd go to meetings and they'd ask what I'd been up to since *Nowhere Boy*, and I'd say, 'I just had my fourth baby' – and I could feel myself being shuffled out the door. I was reading scripts I thought were great, and the agents would say, 'Well, after they've asked David Fincher and Alejandro González Iñárritu...' and I would be about seventh or eighth on the list."

Directing *50 Shades*, she says, was in part a "Machiavellian" tactic, "to move myself further up the list, so that I can do the films I want to do". It should be noted that while the book was a rousing commercial success, it was not a critical one – and though Taylor-Johnson wants to honour *50 Shades* fans' expectations, she also hopes that critics "will think I did a good job".