

(clockwise from above)
Ed Harris; Hayden Christensen; Jude Law, raw from his marriage break-up; photographer Sam Taylor-Wood: "Some people's emotions are so close to the surface and they accessed them immediately."

BOYS DO CRY



It's not often you see grown men shed a tear, particularly A-list actors. But British artist/photographer Sam Taylor-Wood convinced these famous faces to play the crying game. So who was acting and who wasn't? Report by Kathy Brewis



Sam Taylor-Wood bounds up the stairs to the top floor of her bright London studio, daughter in tow, apologising for being slightly late. Everything takes longer with a seven-year-old on board and it's school holidays. A few felt-tip pens later and Angelica is busily drawing. Her mother is sipping black tea and talking about the cancers that nearly killed her in her early-30s, and a childhood she's still escaping from. In a blink we've moved from the wonderfully normal domestic happiness she enjoys now (she describes her husband, Jay Jopling, her art dealer and London gallery owner, as her soulmate) to the extraordinary, otherworldly sadness that pervades most of the work she has made since she left art school 14 years ago. The melancholy was there long before she became ill, she says. "I suppose it's part of my psychology."

One of her early videos showed a bowl of fruit rotting, a twist on the perfectly preserved subjects of traditional still-life painting. Even her panoramic *Five Revolutionary Seconds* photographs had a hint of despair beneath their glossy celebrity visions. Now, for her latest project, she has persuaded a host of A-list actors to cry in front of her. The results are mournful, in the best possible sense. Here's Tim Roth, trapped in some private grief; there's Willem Dafoe furiously wiping away a tear. Daniel Craig is red-eyed from weeping, while Gabriel Byrne stares unseeingly out of a hotel window, disconsolate.

Taylor-Wood, 37, cuts a slight but determined figure, understated (she's wearing a grey T-shirt, white jeans and cowboy boots) but ballsy. Actors are paid extra in their contracts if the film role they are in requires tears, so it was a challenge to ask them to cry in real-life. How many people would dare ask Benicio Del Toro to come over all emotional? "Of all of them, he was the biggest challenge in my mind, because he's got such a strong masculine air about him," she says. "He was thrown off balance. Then he padded around me - he's quite bear-like - and thought about it. It was a process of negotiation until he got to the point where he would."

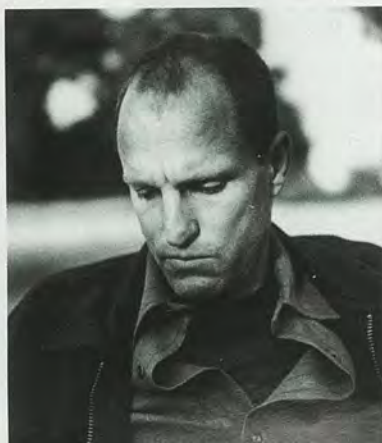
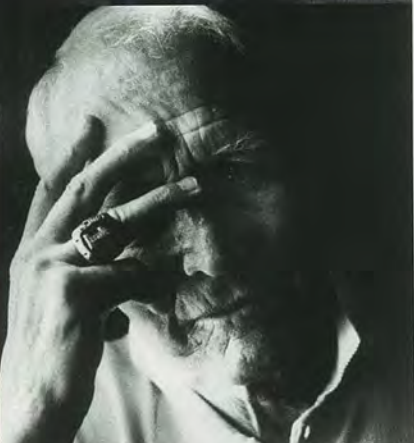
Most of the actors in these photographs are genuinely crying, but a few just turned on the tears for the camera. "Some people's emotions are so close to the surface and they could access them immediately - which I felt really jealous of." She wants to leave the details of who did what a mystery - she likes the fact that you can't spot the fakers. Some of the people she thought would be easiest to get to cry were the hardest, she says, and vice versa. Some took hours to get to a point where they were crying; some took a few minutes. Some she felt sorry for (such as Jude Law, raw from his break-up with Sadie Frost when Taylor-Wood photographed him). One actor, when he saw the finished print, was horrified: "I look like my mother," he said. Another had never cried in front of his wife; she found it "absolutely heart-wrenching" to see the image. "Steve Buscemi said, 'Why are you making me do this when I feel so happy, when it's



Of all of her subjects, Taylor-Wood describes Benicio Del Toro (above) as the biggest challenge. "It was a process of negotiation until he got to the point where he would [cry]," she says. (left) Robert Downey Jr.



(clockwise from above) Gabriel Byrne lets his guard down for a few moments; Paul Newman sheds a tear; a pensive Woody Harrelson; and Steve Buscemi, who asked the photographer, "Why are you making me do this when I feel so happy, when it's such a beautiful day?"



such a beautiful sunny day? The camera is a great separator, but it's still really difficult to be in a room with a grown man crying. Especially when you're responsible for it." Ed Harris cried for a long time, almost moving Taylor-Wood to tears herself. "He kind of broke through the lens and went straight into the heart of me. My eyes just filled up - then he leant forward and asked if I was OK." She photographed most of the actors in their hotel rooms. "Hotels are so transitory. It added to the isolation and loneliness and emptiness, to that feeling of being lost."

The germ of the idea came at a dinner party more than two years ago when somebody said: "Women cry and men get angry". This played around in Taylor-Wood's mind for a while until she realised she wanted to make some work showing men stripped of their defences. After endless letters and phone calls to the teams of publicists and agents who surround A-list celebrities, she finally managed to get each person to herself.

Acting as director, she would coax them on. "It was very intimate. Normally a photo shoot is about looking your best and being asked to project your ego." This was the opposite. "The process was about trust and intimacy and getting to a point where they would allow me to see their vulnerability and document it."

Taylor-Wood has been criticised in the past for using celebrities in her work, but she claims there is always a reason. In this case, she wanted the men to be iconic figures, powerful men that viewers would identify with and feel familiar with. She liked the idea of taking away their power. Besides, she says: "If you look at the history of art, all the way through from Manet to Gainsborough, everyone painted iconic figures of their time."

But she admits that the project started to wear her down after a while. "After the first five, which I did in a week, I felt as depressed as I had for a long time. I had to really pull myself together and gather my resources for the last few."

So why put herself - and the men - through it? The answer lies somewhere in her subconscious, but it's clear from her own experiences that, despite her non-self-pitying manner, she knows sadness and loss all too well. And as an artist, she has a ready outlet for emotions that, at least in public, she tends to keep below the surface.

First, the cancer - or rather cancers, for she has had the disease twice. First, in 1997, six months after Angelica was born, she was diagnosed with bowel cancer, which, she kept being told, is an old person's disease: she shouldn't have had it. But she did. She watched the 1998 Turner [art] prize, for which she had been nominated, from her hospital bed. She had 50 centimetres of her colon removed, got better, went back to her old life of partying hard and working like crazy and then, a year later, found a lump under her arm. This time it was breast cancer. There followed a mastectomy and months of chemotherapy. Now, she lives very healthily, does yoga, tries to get enough rest - though she says she still pushes herself too hard.

She is not a gloomy person. She talks matter-of-factly about her illnesses, even sees the funny side. ("I got diagnosed with breast cancer on National Breast [Awareness] Day - I remember sitting and roaring with laughter.") She is not one of those



(clockwise from above) Sylvia actor Daniel Craig sobbed; Tim Roth, more known for tough roles in flicks such as *Reservoir Dogs*, retreated into his own private grief; Willem Dafoe wipes away a tear; and Laurence Fishburne – a million miles away from his tough guy image.



people who want to impress you with how much they have suffered, but she wants to be open about it for the sake of anybody in a similar position. "I don't want to set myself up as a role model, but when I was going through it there was nobody I could focus on who was alive: everyone who'd written about it had died." She testifies to the fact that survival is possible and talks of gaining "a certain wisdom" from these prolonged brushes with her own mortality. But she lost a lot, not just parts of her body. "I lost five years of my life, which was given over just to being ill. There was a big loss in my early time with Angelica, because I was ill six months after she was born, so that was pretty tough. I missed our first Christmas together – I was

operated on on Christmas Eve. And there's a loss of innocence. I remember being painfully jealous of people I'd see on the streets for not having to think about cancer every day. Everyone has things they're frightened of, but that's such a major thing to live with."

She has been cancer-free for more than three years. "Heaven." Perhaps now she feels safe enough to let out the feelings she kept inside during the crisis period? "They're coming out right now," she admits. "I'm a neurotic mess at the moment." (This is far from obvious, but I'll take her word for it.) "In all that time, I didn't really cry. I can see the irony of me making all these people cry. In hindsight, I was putting on a brave face."

The illnesses weren't the first time she'd had to do this. She describes her childhood and teenage years as "dysfunctional". She was born in South London and, until she was nine, lived in a small house with hippie parents, a younger sister, six dogs, eight cats, friends called Hawthorn and Acorn, and a series of random people who passed through. "At the time I hated it. I just wanted to be normal." Then her parents split up and her sister, mother and new stepfather moved out of the city to "one of the most awful places on Earth". We moved from suburbia where I'd go ice skating every Saturday and to the cinema – into this horror house in the woods in the middle of nowhere with my new stepfather, which became a commune. It was all very strange and confusing."

The house in the woods became a yoga centre and home to a full-on, orange-wearing cult. "It was awful. I had absolutely no boundaries as a teenager and I really wanted them. I think that's why I've made certain decisions in my life now, like getting married. We all had Sanskrit names. It was so f***ed up. Free love and endless streams of yogis. I left home as fast as I could."

To look at her now, to look at her idyllic life – supportive husband, lovely child, artistic success – and her relaxed, friendly manner, you would think Taylor-Wood has left her demons behind her. But, she says, they aren't so easy to shake off.

"It's an eternal battle to not invite chaos – to try and keep everything calm. I think that's why I work so hard." She still hasn't cried, herself, she says – except from pain, during the chemotherapy – but her work is eloquent enough on the subject of how she feels or has felt.

These latest photographs form part of a new show in New York, called *Sorrow, Suspension, Ascension*. She has also been collaborating with British actor Ray Winstone on a feature film about William Blake. "Ray's going to be Blake and I'm directing it." She laughs. "As long as there's lots of crying, I'll be fine." Her impressive work ethic is proof she doesn't take life for granted. "If you've had cancer once, you're pretty aware that you don't know what's around the next corner, but if you've had it twice, you're really aware of that." ■

The book *Crying Men* by Sam Taylor-Wood (ISBN 3865210392) will be available in Australia from November 1, at selected Angus & Robertson stores or online at www.angusrobertson.com.au, price \$135 plus postage