

Sam Taylor-Wood, whose film has been nominated for a Palme d'Or at Cannes, seems to have it all. But, she tells **Anna van Praagh**, her success comes in the wake of a string of personal tragedies

My life hasn't been a fairy tale



'Ssssssh," Sam Taylor-Wood giggles to her children, hiding herself in the bedroom to escape the noise. "Can we keep the TV on?" her daughter, Angelica, calls from the sitting-room of their cottage in the winelands of South Africa's Western Cape, where they are on a break.

"Yessss," Taylor-Wood replies, firmly closing the door. Dressed in a grey T-shirt and jeans and clutching a cup of green tea, the 41-year-old photographer and artist seems like any other busy mother struggling to juggle work with half-term.

The happy, relaxed domestic holiday scene is a million miles from the glitz and glamour of Cannes where her film, *Love You More*, has just been nominated for the short-film Palme d'Or.

So why isn't she in Cannes soaking up the anticipation and excitement? "I didn't want to get too caught up in it," she says. "I wanted to come to it fresh, to be able to observe it, not to get too involved in the marketplace feel of it all." Nevertheless, the family are flying to Cannes on Wednesday for the screening and the Palme d'Or party.

Love You More is a 15-minute piece set in 1978 about two teenagers losing their virginity one hot summer's afternoon.

The celebrated director Anthony Minghella was working on the film when he died in March. "My one great regret is that Anthony won't be there with me at the

screening," she says. "His death is the biggest heartbreak I've suffered for a long time."

Collaboration with big names is something Taylor-Wood does often. Many of her pieces have centred around celebrities, most notably her video of David Beckham sleeping, and her video for Elton John's *I Want Love*, featuring a lip-synching Robert Downey Jr. It is a predilection that has served her career well, less so her reputation. Critics are prone to dismiss her as an artist better known for her illustrious friends than for her work.

She admits the subject irritates her. "When Scorsese or Coppola cast celebrities in their work, it goes without question. And yet when I do..." she trails off, dejected. "I'm interested in the acting and staging of specific emotions and so I work with actors. It's a small proportion of what I do but it's always what people seem to focus on."

Taylor-Wood is also famous for her husband, Jay Jopling, the superstar art dealer and owner of the hugely influential White Cube gallery in Hoxton.

The couple live in a large house in Marylebone, west London, with their two daughters, Angelica, 11, and Jessie Phoenix, 19 months, and lead a life that looks almost impossibly glamorous. But despite outward appearances, Taylor-Wood's story is no fairy tale.

Born in Streatham, south London, to a yoga-teacher and astrologist mother, Taylor-Wood's biker father left when she was nine. It prompted her mother to enrol the family in a commune in Sussex, where they wore orange robes and took Sanskrit names, all of which Taylor-Wood hated. "We were Buddhist one week, Christian

the next. My mum told me once I was a Hindu," she says, drily. When Taylor-Wood was 15, her mother walked out on her, her younger sister, Ashley, and her half-brother, Kristian.

Walking down the road and seeing her mother draw the blinds in the house she shared with her new boyfriend was one of the defining moments in her life.

"My childhood had its challenges, like everyone's. It imbued me with certain things and took away others. It made me very determined."

Determined to become a successful artist? "I wanted to become an artist because it meant endless possibilities," she concedes. "Art was a way of reinventing myself."

Taylor-Wood was reconciled with her mother, who now lives in Australia, after the birth of Angelica. "Life's too short to hold grudges. When you have children yourself you learn how easy it is to make mistakes. It works the other way, too. You make your own luck. I've been very lucky with the people who have come into my life."

It was pure serendipity that led to Taylor-Wood attending Goldsmiths College and studying with the group who would become the fêted Young British Artists of the 1990s. She was persuaded by a tutor to transfer there from a north-east London polytechnic.

They were heady days. "We were conscious that what we were involved in was momentous," she says. "Exhibitors and curators were flying in from abroad to look at our work. There was a real, surreal sense we were part of the zeitgeist." And as Britart reached its heyday in the late-1990s, Taylor-Wood was at the forefront, nominated for the Turner Prize in 1998, and winner of the Most Promising Artist award at the 1997 Venice Biennale.

But success was interspersed with tragedy. She had Angelica at 29, six months after she married Jopling in Tokyo; three months later, she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She beat it, only to get an unrelated attack of breast cancer, aged 33. "The worst time of my life," she says matter-of-factly. "Each time. Just because you've faced your own mortality it doesn't make it any less frightening."

When she was nominated for the Turner Prize, rather than attend the ceremony, she watched the television coverage from a chemotherapy ward. "I never thought of having cancer as something that was unfair. I just braced myself and tried to get through it."

Her determination and bravery were formidable, not least because she refused the potentially life-saving drug Tamoxifen because it would render her infertile.

Taylor-Wood has been given the all-clear and, as you would expect of someone who "never sits still for a moment", her diary is filled with future projects. She is planning an exhibition at White Cube in October, and is hard at work on her first feature-length film, an adaptation of Julie Myerson's 2007 novel *The Story of You*.

She often looks back on the days when she was a YBA,

when it was all beginning and the possibilities were endless. "They were exciting times," she says. "But next week in Cannes will also be unbelievably exciting. Having children is exciting. Life puts the past into perspective."

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Artistic reinvention: Taylor-Wood, right; a scene from *Love You More*, top right; and *Self Portrait as a Tree*, which depicts the artist's feeling of isolation as a cancer patient

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Sam Taylor-Wood with her husband, Jay Jopling