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Jean-Marc Vallée

25 Apr 2006

As international film directors continue to produce superlative dramas concerning gay issues, we chatted with the director of C.R.A.Z.Y., Jean-Marc Vallée.

His superior coming of age drama, which spans three decades and is set against a backdrop of glam-rock and religious ignorance, won eight Canadian Oscars and is a life-affirming joy to watch.

Rachael Scott caught up with Vallée to find out more about the biographical nature of the film, the importance of its cracking soundtrack, sexual orientation, father and son relationships and the difference between 'gay films' and 'coming of age' dramas.

My understanding is that you wrote C.R.A.Z.Y. with François Boulay and that the story is a mixture of both of your childhood experiences. Can you tell me how the collaboration between the two of you came about?

I wrote the script alone and François was the collaborator. It's based on *his* life and it started with an anecdote he told me about his brother who committed suicide. From that moment on François gained a father and it was at his brother's funeral when his father gave him a hug – the first and only hug that he'd had from his Dad – that he understood it was his father's way of accepting him. He would rather accept him than lose another son.

So I asked him to put down everything about his brother on paper and he did. He gave me 100 pages of random memories of his life and from those memories we worked on the script for four years. Then I took a year off living on my savings and my credit cards and I wrote *C.R.A.Z.Y.* as it is now.

It's a blend of his world and everything related to the father and son relationship. The sexual orientation of the character is based on *his* history and the music while the faith and spirituality is from *my* world.

How much of yourself did you put into the film? Which parts were specifically your experiences?

Well, there's a lot. Even though I'm not gay I felt a lot like the character and I felt different when I was a kid. I used music to dream and to give me wings. It gave me a feeling that I could do something with my life, just like Zac did when he's alone in his room with the music blasting and he was singing along to David Bowie; doing his push-ups and martial arts to 'Shine on you Crazy Diamond', smoking a joint to 'Sympathy for the Devil' and then hallucinating in the church that the song is still playing.

I experienced that all the way through my youth and used music to survive - just like the character does - and now I'm using music to make films.

So is the soundtrack an important component of C.R.A.Z.Y.?

This is my way of putting my signature on a film, to create a soundtrack that's almost a mix tape. When you do mix tapes you choose each song meticulously. The order of the songs and the way they blend into each other creates a rhythm. You're trying to have different levels of emotions and feelings and that's what I tried to do with the soundtrack. It's just the story of my life.

"I'm not making a 'gay film', I'm making a 'coming of age' story; a love story between a father and a son. Of course the gay issue is there and it's important, but it's about the father and son relationship."

How did you merge the different skills of writer and director on the film?

As I was writing I wanted to satisfy the director in me who wasn't satisfied with his previous films. Nobody was sending me good scripts, so I tried to write a script that was going to save my life. I wanted to make a film that I felt proud of, that I would love to watch and would make me feel powerful - like a great novel or a great song. Films can give you an impression of happiness. When I see a great film I want to make films.

Like the scene in the church where Zac rises above the congregation – is that the sort of feeling you're thinking of?

Yes, exactly. That, as well as the ending, which is a beautiful and touching resolution. Zac loved to go on the road with his dad and eat French fries. At the end of the film he's back there and it's his turn to bring his old dad to *his* road. It's like he's come full circle.

Most films concerned with coming out are gay specific and made by gay directors. As a straight man what made you feel you could relate to Zac's struggle with his sexuality?

Well, for Zac the difference is his sexual orientation, but with this film the difference could be the colour of his skin or he could be mentally challenged, like Forrest Gump. The difference could be something else.

I used to feel different because I was growing up in a Catholic, working class neighbourhood where there was no art and I was into music, so I was like the different one. Like Zac I felt that music made me dream, so that's why I could easily



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relate to him. I could also relate to his relationship with his father and that's what kept me with the project.

I'm not making a 'gay film', I'm making a 'coming of age' story; a love story between a father and a son. Of course the gay issue is there and it's important, but it's about the father and son relationship.

Zac says, "As far as I can remember I've always hated Christmas". Why does he hate Christmas? Because he can't get what he wants. Why can't he get what he wants? Because he knows if he does his father won't be happy and he's going to lose what's very precious in his eyes: the love of his father. So everything is built around making this relationship evolve to where it goes at the end.

"The film is not about a coming out. It's not a guy who knows that he's gay who's wondering when he's going to come out of the closet. It's a guy who doesn't want to be that way and that's the beauty of it."

Can you tell me your thoughts behind Zac denying his sexuality for so long and his father Gervais refusing to accept his son's sexuality?

Well, Zac denied his sexuality so viscerally, so intensely and it was beautiful to see him fight so hard not to be what he really was. But why struggle that much? See, the film is not about a coming out. It's not a guy who knows that he's gay who's wondering when he's going to come out of the closet. It's a guy who doesn't want to be that way and *that's* the beauty of it.

He wants to look like his older brother, he wants to be a man and he's struggling. In his world he doesn't want to be gay.

As for the father figure, well I'm the father of two sons and that would be my first reflex. I mean, you're going to miss one important thing in life; you're not going to have any children. Of course, today it's possible, but the father's speech was very basic. He hadn't thought about what he was saying, but he felt it very deeply.

He felt he was close to losing a son and there's nothing stronger than having children and coming close to losing one. It was easy to create those characters and I wrote the thing so I portrayed myself everywhere, I'm there. But, of course, I'm more in Zac and the father and a little bit in the mother.

You treat all your characters with compassion even though some of them aren't particularly likeable. It would have been easy to demonise someone like Gervais, but you showed the good in him as well as the bad. Is it in your nature not to judge people too strongly?

Well, we needed that in the film, I wanted the audience to care about the characters and sometimes to hate them. This is how life is. We're not like that or like that [moves hand up high, then low down], we have our contradictions and that's the way it is. I can be very nice and sometimes I can be an asshole. I'm not perfect.

I like to describe *C.R.A.Z.Y.* as a mystical fable of the human soul, in all its craziness and in its beauty. And it's beautiful because it *is* crazy. This is what's nice about the human race. We're not perfect and that's the beauty of it. To be crazy is healthy.



"I like to describe *C.R.A.Z.Y.* as a mystical fable of the human soul, in all its craziness and in its beauty. And it's beautiful because it *is* crazy."

Do you think that Canada has moved with the times or is there still a lot of homophobia within certain communities?

Of course there is; homophobia is everywhere. Conservatives are back in power and now we have a new Prime Minister who doesn't want to listen to the gay issue about weddings and adoption. Now they're looking at the law again, but it's more tolerant than what it was.

As adults I don't think my gay friends, François and others, have any problems living as homosexuals, but in the Seventies it was different. And I'm sure it's just as hell now as it was then for a 14-year old kid who suddenly realises that he's different. I found out by making this film that the suicide rate in the gay community is very high between 14 and 18. That says a lot.

So that's why this film, even though I didn't make it to embrace a cause, serves a cause, and that's to help kids. If they bring their parents to see the film or they buy the DVD they can come out with the film. If it helps, then it has done good.

Read our review of [C.R.A.Z.Y.](#)

***C.R.A.Z.Y.* is released in the UK on 21 April 2006. Find out more at www.crazyfilm.ca.**

***C.R.A.Z.Y.* [2005]**

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Released: 21 August 2006

ASIN: B000FTJ76Y

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