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How Heavy This Hammer

Kazik Radwanski

Producer Dan Montgomery, Kazik Radwanski. **Production company** Medium Density Fibreboard Films (MDFF) (Toronto, Canada). **Written and directed by** Kazik Radwanski. **Director of photography** Nikolay Michaylov. **Editor** Ajla Odobašić. **Sound** Grant Edmonds.

With Erwin Van Cotthem (Erwin), Kate Ashley (Kate), Seth Kirsh (Seth), Andrew Latter (Andrew).

DCP, colour. 75 min. English.

Premiere 13 September 2015, Toronto International Film Festival

The mournful aria already suggests that the battle is lost and sure enough, the walls of the fort are soon breached. Skirmishes, spurting blood, scattered resistance and the defences duly come crashing down, the horde is not to be stopped. Erwin's fighting a losing battle too, with his waistline, the uncontrollable bouts of tiredness, the random outbursts of rage and the constant, unquenchable itch to return to the computer screen. What is the source of all this compulsion? Erwin has a respectable job, a wife who cares about him and two lively sons, he even manages to get out now and again with the dog or to play rugby. But director Kazik Radwanski isn't interested in how the war began or what will happen once the fort is razed, this is the portrait of a state, of small shifts, of stasis. And although the camera scarcely moves from Erwin's side, this is by no means just a study of him, but of how easy it is to lose your way among all the muted coercions of North American life. People move a bit and then they move back, one battle ends and another begins and there is but one constant: the eternal weight of that accursed hammer.

James Lattimer

A dysfunctional person

Another kind of character drama – that of patient observation, not of a quest – is showcased by Canadian director Kazik Radwanski in *How Heavy This Hammer*, the follow-up to his acclaimed debut, *Tower* (2012). It is the kind of film that seems only possible these days in the micro-budgeted side of independent filmmaking. Here, nuance can be observed in close-up detail, a close-up at once speaking of the filmmaker's dedicated attention to the limited purview of their character's world, and speaking of the limitations of budget: no need to fill the scene with much in the way of space, set, costume or action when the intimate orbit of the camera around a myopic subject tells us how little he or she cares about the surrounding world.

In fact, it usually is a 'he', both because most filmmakers invariably are men but also because the kinds of short-sighted characters studied so closely in the movies tend to be stunted men or stubborn boys. In Radwanski's humble *How Heavy the Hammer* – surely the title is the grandest aspect of the production – it's nebbishy, overweight and middle-aged father Erwin (Erwin Cotthem), who hardly seems to work, barely parents his two boys, puts in minimal effort towards his wife, falls asleep in the middle of just about any task, appears unimpressive (at best) at his hobby of rugby, and only seems modestly, indifferently interested in his only escape, a decrepit, Viking-themed strategy video game. At times sweet and considerate, at others short and irrational, something with this man certainly seems off, as if he can't seem to define himself beyond blurry lines in any position he should be taking in life. Is Erwin afflicted by some malady of apathy (or disease), as his wife first worryingly and then angrily suggests to him? Has he suddenly or gradually become a dysfunctional person in all aspects of his life? Or has he always been like this? The film remains without judgment, forming a story nearly recursive in structure and almost stifling in how little we see beyond Erwin's lumbering movements. Such a small story, such an average person to spend time with – this is (...) quiet, a bit pensive, a bit mysterious, and never less than thoughtful. The kind of film you love to discover at a festival.

Daniel Kasman, September 2015

Low-key personal predicaments

'I think my films, in a funny way, are really personal,' he says. 'They're about me, or my family, or relationships I've had. But then I try to ground that by finding someone who's completely different than me, and try to incorporate their life.'

Like *Tower*'s Derek, Erwin seems at times to barely register as a character. With him preoccupied by a computer strategy game, drifting in and out of family life like a roving balloon, and constantly falling asleep, his midlife crisis is muted, even a bit pitiable.

Shot with shaky, hand-held cameras that seem to warp around star Van Cotthem's massive frame, *How Heavy the Hammer* stylistically evokes the work of British socialist realist filmmakers such as Ken Loach and Lindsay Anderson, or those of Belgian sibling duo Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who have a knack for grinding their characters through private tragedies. (...)

For Radwanski, these sorts of low-key personal predicaments make for recognisable drama – the stuff of real life. 'It is a pathetic problem this character has,' he explains. 'But at the same time, it is their problem. It is defining their lives. It's his opera.'

John Semley, The Globe and Mail, 10 September, 2015

Silent pressures

Radwanski's sensitive and empathetic approach effectively brings the viewer into this mundanity and helping us understand the silent pressures and tensions of this unremarkable man and his existential woes. (...) Van Cotthem gives an involving performance that, while not especially emotive, communicates this man's inner world. It's Radwanski's directorial approach – nothing flashy but always formally thoughtful – that makes this minimal story into something memorable and affecting, and refreshingly unhip in contrast with so much of the indie fare we see too often. *How Heavy This Hammer* seems to be driven sincerely by human compassion and curiosity, and firmly establishes Radwanski as one of Canada's best working filmmakers.

Adam Cook, September 2015

A gem in the rough

In just two features and several shorts, co-conceived with producing partner Dan Montgomery, Radwanski has proven himself a gentler, Southern Ontarian answer to Dardennes-style social realism, finding dignity and pathos in the repetitive rhythms and small pleasures of working-class lives. Drawn to distinctive mugs and voices, he's turned up another gem in the rough in Van Cotthem, a funny, natural presence who holds Radwanski's claustrophobic close-ups whether he's improbably bathing his adolescent sons with his beefy hands, charging ahead as an amateur rugby goon, or staring dazed before his retro computer monitor, ghostly-white mirror images of the screen lighting up his glasses as a Bellini aria swells on the soundtrack. You could read that operatic touch as satirical, a jab at the distance between Erwin's quotidian life (which he seems unable or unwilling to better) and the fantasy he'd choose for himself if he could self-actualise. But Radwanski's previous work (...) suggests a more generous reading: that people like Erwin are noble for the lives they wish they could lead, even if the ruts they're stuck in seem inescapable.

Angelo Muredda, Cinema Scope Online, September 2015



Kazik Radwanski was born in 1985 in Toronto (Canada). He studied Film at Ryerson University and co-founded the production company Medium Density Fibreboard Films (MDFF). Starting in 2009, he had short films screening at the Berlinale Shorts Competition for three consecutive years, with *Princess Margaret Blvd.*, *Out in that Deep Blue Sea* and *Green Crayons*. Following *Tower* (2012),

How Heavy This Hammer is his second full-length feature film.

Films

2008: *Princess Margaret Blvd.* (14 min., Berlinale Shorts 2009). 2009: *Out in that Deep Blue Sea* (16 min., Berlinale Shorts 2010). 2010: *Green Crayons* (10 min., Berlinale Shorts 2011). 2012: *Tower* (78 min.). 2013: *Cutaway* (7 min.). 2015: *How Heavy This Hammer*.