

Four a Minute Productions
and
First Names Films

present



Written & Directed by
Tim Young

Produced by
Jeff Ryan

Starring
Brian Haley
Jeff Ryan

(2015, 6 minutes, USA)

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BONDING

LOGLINE

A father handcuffs his son to a canoe in order to spend quality time with him.

SYNOPSIS

James, mid-20s, simply does not have the time to go on an afternoon canoe trip with his dad. They've made the plans, he's returned home to visit, and now they're sitting in the actual canoe on the riverbank – but he has to cancel. Something has come up with his girlfriend, Sandy.

Dad won't accept this. He tries to lay a guilt trip on his son, then begs, and then finally, all other options having failed, *handcuffs him*. They're going to spend quality time together, whether James likes it or not.

Out on the river, James tries to reason with his father, but Dad is adamant that they relax and enjoy nature. James gets desperate, and attempts to break free by stealing the handcuff keys from Dad's pocket, but they're just out of reach. Finally, he submits, and at last engages in his dad's bizarre bonding fantasy.

With his guard now down, Dad shares his philosophy on how to treat the people you care about the most. *"When you love someone like that, you gotta do whatever it takes to hang onto them."*

Suddenly, it hits James: *Sandy*. He can't let her down. He has to get back to her. But can he convince his deranged father to uncuff him? After all, it's Dad's maniacal devotion to his loved ones that has led James to this realization. And if James can't convince his dad to let him go, he may have to try something desperate.



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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Bonding is a dark comedy about a father-son canoe trip where, in the strangest way possible, James and his Dad realize just how much they have in common. But it starts with handcuffs. In an absurd twist on a familiar dynamic, Dad, starved for quality time with his adult son James, takes the outrageously desperate measure of locking him up to a canoe.

When I was developing this story with producer/star Jeff Ryan, we initially conceived it as a straightforward drama that would tackle these issues – sans handcuffs. But only when we hit on the idea of adding an absurd layer to the plot, of making the subtext into text, did the story really come together. Adding the device of the handcuffs allowed us to make this a comedy and also, in an oblique fashion, tackle some meaty issues.

James objects to being cuffed, not just because it's inherently crazy, but because that's not how you're supposed to treat someone that you love. Dad disagrees on principle: if you really love someone, you have to prove that you are unwilling to let that love die. You have to be desperate. Once James understands this, he's finally able to connect with his father.

But is that connection real, or is James just doing what he has to do to win his freedom? His actions later in the film – first by turning the tables on his father, then by taking drastic measures to prove his love to his girlfriend – provide potential answers to this question. But it was important to me that it be ambiguous. Yes, James is escaping his father, but I do think the understanding they come to is real. And in understanding his father, James learns something about himself. He too is eager to prove his love, and prone to justify his desperate actions with macho, "I had no choice" posturing.

Despite the silly surface trappings of the movie, the questions at the core of the movie are real. How do you make someone understand you love them? Are you doomed to repeat the same flawed behavior as your parents? I hope audiences will appreciate these ideas *and* laugh at the over-the-top, unhinged behavior on display in *Bonding*.

-Tim Young

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Bonding was fully self-financed by writer/director Tim Young and producer/star Jeff Ryan. It was the result of what was initially a very laid-back collaboration that began when Young and Ryan met at the Annoyance Theater in Brooklyn, New York.

Young explains, "There is a really great spirit in the New York improv comedy, and at the Annoyance Theater in particular, of making art for the sake of art. So when Jeff and I met and discovered that we both had a passion for independent filmmaking, we thought 'Let's make something together!'"

Over the course of several brainstorming sessions, that "something" developed from a silly one-off sketch to a proper short film, and along the way grew in complexity and scope. Ryan: "When it came together, it happened so quickly. One day, we were just daydreaming about shooting a little video at some point over the summer – and a month later, I was handcuffed to a boat on a river."



A Father, A Son, and A Boat

Young and Ryan would meet regularly at Stumptown Coffee at the Ace Hotel in Midtown Manhattan. Ryan: "It was close to Penn Station, and that's how I got into the city when I came in for auditions. So Tim would ride his bike from Brooklyn and meet me there and we'd just talk."

"We really started from nothing," Young remembers, "and creatively that was very exciting. We'd just talk about movies we liked and trade personal stories, and eventually we found this common ground in talking our families, and how those relationship dynamics had shifted in an interesting way as we'd gotten older."

By the end of that particular meeting, they knew it would be a father/son story. Then Ryan remembered his next-door neighbor had a canoe, and that seemed to fit. "A father, a son, and a boat," Tim recalls. "That's like, almost all you need for a short film. Or so we thought." Young went home that afternoon and started writing what at that time they were simply calling *Boat*.

It went through several drafts, and several more Stumptown meetings. "At that point it was a drama. Tim and I both wanted something authentic and grounded that really spoke to this father/son relationship we'd imagined, with these two characters who couldn't connect." But 5-6 drafts later, it was still missing something. Young: "It felt inert. In improv, they're always tell

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you to 'Make it active.' Don't just talk about a relationship, *show* the relationship." Ryan continues, "So we asked ourselves, if this were an improv scene and we were playing these characters, what would happen?"

Handcuffs. What if Dad was so desperate for some quality time with his son that he would physically lock him up? Suddenly, they were bursting with ideas. Young tore up the old script and started fresh. The next time they met, they were locking down a shoot date.

"So how do we make this a real movie?"

From the start, Young and Ryan knew they had a very limited budget to work with. But now they had a story that they really believed in, and a casting idea that could really make the movie. Jeff had grown up in Gillette, New Jersey, the same small town as character actor Brian Haley, whose 30-year film career includes working with Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood, the Coen Brothers and more. "Brian had taken me under his wing and encouraged me to seriously pursue acting," says Ryan, whose work has paid off with memorable roles in *The Way, Way Back* and *Orange in the New Black*. "Brian came to see my previous short, *Nailed It*, and had told me he'd love to be in the next one. And now we had this role that perfectly suited to him."

Getting Haley meant raising the bar on the entire production. It was Young's turn to call in a favor: "Christine Ng is a friend of mine from film school at NYU who had developed into an incredibly talented DP. She's shot Super Bowl commercials, HBO documentaries, fantastic shorts and music videos. We'd been talking about working together for a while and this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Everything else came together from there. Young enlisted his wife Elaine Strutz, a filmmaker and TV editor, to come on board as a do-everything on-set producer. Jeff brought in sound mixer Ross Matthei and AD Arielle Cimino from *Nailed It*. Sandy would be played by Cimino's sister, Tori Grace Hines. AC Leyla Perez was a personal friend of Young, Strutz, and Ng. Even the camera, an Arri Amira package, would be rented from a friend. And of course there was the neighbor with the boat. "We pulled every personal favor we could," Ryan recalls.

Out on the Water

The filmmakers knew shooting most of the movie on a canoe in a river would present some challenges. They had a plan. "We had a bad plan," Young laughs. "We had one canoe for picture. That's what Brian and Jeff would be in. We thought the rest of us could pile into 3-4 kayaks, we'd tie them all up together, station two PAs with paddles to maneuver us and have one big 'production flotilla.'"

The first problem was the camera. Ng: "There was no way that me, Leyla, and the camera would all fit in one kayak. Maybe I could've fit with just the camera, but I needed Leyla there to pull focus, switch lenses, and obviously to keep the camera from falling in the water." Luckily,

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they were shooting in the Passaic River in New Jersey, just a few minutes from Jeff's hometown of Gillette. And Jeff had more than one friendly neighbor with a canoe. The camera department got a bigger boat.

On the day of shoot, once the two canoes and four kayaks had been taken down to the river's edge, the other flaws in their plan were laid bare. "The river was very shallow and rocky at the edge," Ryan remembers. "We had scouted the location after a rainstorm, but a couple dry weeks later and it was really more like a creek." The flotilla would not float, let alone be maneuverable.

Before they could come up with a complicated Plan B, Young tried something simple. "I just waded out into the water, and I found that at its deepest point, it only came up to my waist." Haley and Ryan climbed into their canoe, and Young conducted rehearsals from just over the edge in the water. "It was absurd, but also kind of perfect. I got to be right there close up to them performing and I was able to move and street the boat for them so they didn't have to worry about paddling."



Once the camera crew loaded into their vessel, assistant producer Elaine Strutz waded in herself to guide their canoe. "It was a hot August day, so I didn't mind at all," Strutz recalls. "It was definitely the easiest way to move everyone around."

When it came time to shoot the meat of the film, when father and son are out on the water, the low-tech setup proved surprisingly effective. "Having Elaine and I pull the canoes worked out great," Young explains. "We had such fine tune control over the speed and direction of both the actors and the camera, and the movement was so smooth. It was like nature's dolly."

Locked Up

While the crew was knee-deep in river water, producer/actor Jeff Ryan was more concerned about his wrist. "As a producer, I wanted real handcuffs of course," Ryan recounts. "I knew we'd have some close-ups and I wanted them to look authentic. As an actor, I regretted that decision."

With nearly the entire crew out on the water, traditional set protocol wasn't always followed. "We just got in a rhythm of doing a couple takes back to back until we got far enough downstream that Tim and Elaine had to walk us back. It just didn't make sense for me to uncuff myself between takes."

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The film's escape montage, where Ryan's character James attempts to break free, was especially painful. "We had this scene written where I am trying everything I can to get out of the cuffs. I'm yanking on the chain, trying to squeeze out of them, banging them with the paddle." Ryan says, "It was my movie, so of course I wanted to fully commit." By the end of the day, Ryan felt like a real prisoner. "My wrists were aching, and I'd only told Brian about it because I didn't want to concern anyone else."

For one establishing shot, Ryan and Haley would need to paddle themselves without Young or Strutz to move them downriver. Ryan of course would need to be cuffed for the cameras. "I just couldn't do it," he explains. "Between the shallow gravelly water and having to paddle with one arm, it was impossible for us to move."

"The river won that round," Young concedes, "and even though we didn't get the shot, Jeff earned a tremendous amount of respect from me."

Ryan: "Hey, us actors can be pretty tough."

Unsung Heroes

Even apart from the challenges of shooting in an uncontrolled environment, *Bonding* was a difficult shoot. Aside from producer/actor Ryan, nearly every member of the crew had traveled for the shoot from Boston and New York. Most stayed in Ryan's parents' house, where the occasional impromptu script meeting occurred.

"Brian and I wanted to make sure the first scene was believable," Ryan remembers. "Even though it's a comedy, it needed to be realistic that Dad would take this drastic action of cuffing James." Young recalls "Though we'd already made it hard on ourselves with the budget and the schedule and the conditions, Jeff and I still tried to hold ourselves to a very high standard as far as the material that we were capturing."

While they were focused on the creative details, they received incredible support. Ryan's mother Deborah cooked dinner for the crew and photographed stills on the set. Sound mixer Ross Matthei stayed up late to help secure the canoes to the truck. Key PA Artie Scarano provided invaluable local knowledge – and also appears as a background actor in the final scene.

Young says he's worked on a number of low-budget projects, but "This was remarkable both for how tough it was, and for how well the cast and crew responded to every challenge." Ryan laughs, "When Tim and I started talking about making a movie together, it was supposed to be a simple, little shoot. But obviously it was worth it."

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THE FILMMAKERS

Tim Young | DIRECTOR, WRITER, STORY, EDITOR

Tim Young is a filmmaker whose work has been featured by the Wall Street Journal, Gawker, and the Huffington Post. He has written and directed several projects for the web, including the original *Broad City* web-series (now on Comedy Central). After 13 years in New York, he recently moved to Los Angeles, where he spends his time unpacking, as well as writing, improvising, and cooking.



Jeff Ryan | PRODUCER, STORY, ACTOR (James)

Jeff Ryan is a New Jersey born actor and filmmaker. He is best known for his roles as the pothead son, Charlie, in *The Way Way Back*, the abused male-model, Owen, in the dramatic comedy, *Nailed It*, or his most recent role as Abe, the Appalachian ex-boyfriend, in *Orange Is The New Black*. Jeff continues to write and produce independent projects while working as an actor in New York City.



Brian Haley | ACTOR (Dad)

Brian Haley is an American actor and stand-up comedian. His stand-up act is characterized by playing his all-American looks against manic outbursts and absurd situations. As an actor he may be best known for his roles as Veeko the incompetent kidnapper in the John Hughes movie *Baby's Day Out*, the over-the-top football father Mike Hammersmith (aka Spike's dad) in *Little Giants*, or Clint Eastwood's son Mitch in the movie *Gran Torino*.

Christine Ng | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Christine Ng is a New York-based director of photography. She first fell in love with filmmaking when she was 9 after stumbling onto a film set during a summer night on the neon lit streets of Hong Kong. The first commercial she shot, Honda's *50 states* aired during *Super Bowl XLVI*. The web series, *The Better Half*, which she co-created, executive produced and DP'ed, garnered rave reviews in *IndieWire* and the *Huffington Post*. Her first feature-length documentary, the Emmy nominated *Everything is Copy: Nora Ephron Scripted and Unscripted*, which she co DP'ed with Bradford Young, premiered on HBO in 2015.

Elaine Strutz | ASSOCIATE PRODUCER/CREATIVE CONSULTANT

Elaine is a Detroit-born filmmaker currently living in Los Angeles. She made her first films in high school, winning an Emmy at the age of seventeen for a PSA. Since graduating NYU's film program, she has edited for TV shows such as Discovery's *Killing Fields*, TLC's *Say Yes to the Dress*, and PBS's *e² series*. She edits both narrative and documentary, currently cutting Academy Award winner Zana Briski's upcoming film, *Reverence*. In addition to filmmaking, Elaine is a writer, children's book author/illustrator and a painter.

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CAST

Dad Brian Haley
James Jeff Ryan
Sandy Tori Grace Hines

CREW

Writer/Director Tim Young
Producer Jeff Ryan
Story Jeff Ryan
Tim Young
Director of Photography Christine Ng
Associate Producer/Creative Consultant Elaine Strutz
Assistant Camera Leyla Perez
Sound Recordist Ross Matthei
Assistant Director Arielle Cimino
Key PA Artie Scarano
PA Trenton Anderson
Editor Tim Young
Additional Editing Elaine Strutz
Post-Production Sound TJ Dumser
Ross Matthei
Color Correction Michael Feldman

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