

Interview: Danny Boyle is the Master of Madness in True ‘127 Hours’ With James Franco

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CHICAGO – The power of Danny Boyle is his every film doesn’t look like the last. From “Trainspotting” to “28 Days Later...” to “Sunshine,” his career so far has culminated in the triumphant “Slumdog Millionaire,” which won best picture at the 2009 Oscars.

While Boyle’s directorial range is wide, he says each project holds one central tenet near and dear: life-affirming themes. But what you’ve never seen Boyle do is a true story – that is, until now with the highly anticipated Friday release of the non-superhero, true-story film “127 Hours”.



“127 Hours” director Danny Boyle.

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Boyle almost signed onto a different true-story film earlier in his career, he says in his Chicago interview with HollywoodChicago.com, but it didn’t come together. And “127 Hours,” which is based on the 2004 true-story book “Between a Rock and a Hard Place” by Aron Ralston, also almost didn’t come to fruition.

Ralston, who is portrayed in Boyle’s “127 Hours” by actor James Franco, initially was at odds with Boyle because he wanted to appear in the film himself. Boyle disagreed from the get go and the two initially parted ways. Once Boyle won his Oscar for “Slumdog Millionaire,” Ralston came running back. Ralston then allowed the celebrated director to film the story according to Boyle’s initial vision using a well-known actor instead.

In "127 Hours," Boyle delicately balances the blurry line between capsizing overboard and sinking under. Fueled by Boyle's bold choices, James Franco embodies an Aron Ralston so you feel all of his torture in yours. And 93 short minutes later, you'll never appreciate both of your arms more. Our 0.25-of-an-hour interview with Boyle on "127 Hours" follows.

HollywoodChicago.com: So, a true story this time, eh?

Boyle: Yeah, I've never really done a true story before. I nearly did one earlier. I was heartbroken when it didn't happen. We got very close. We were like two weeks away from filming. We had cast it and everything. It was a story set in Worcester, Mass. with fireman in 1999. They were trapped in a cold-storage facility and six of them died. It was an extraordinary story. We set it up and were built in Toronto.

But one of the widows made it clear that she didn't want the film to go ahead. The studio at the time assumed they'd just buy her off because it's just what people did to get more money, but this woman was not to be bought off. She didn't want the film to happen. You have to back away at that moment because you're dabbling in people's lives. You need the freedom to not just do it factually but to also be honorable to the people you're working with. You're using their lives for entertainment.



"127 Hours" star James Franco.

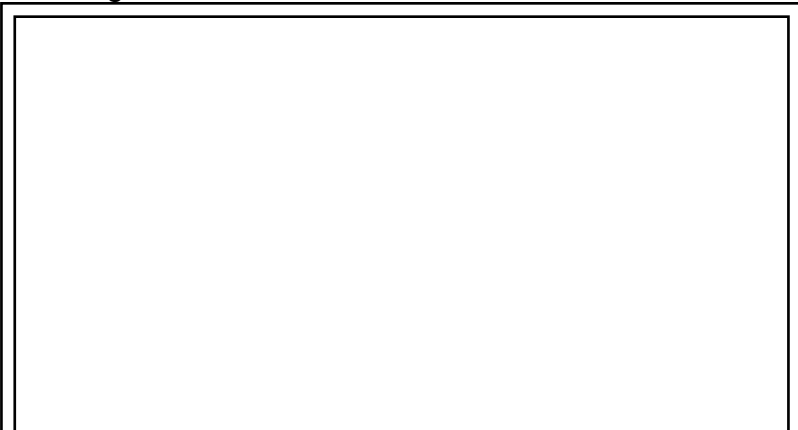
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

HollywoodChicago.com: How involved was Aron Ralston in "127 Hours"?

Boyle: He was very involved. We showed him everything at the script stage. He gave us lots of notes – some of which we listened to and some of which we didn't. I had first met him in 2006 and asked to make it then, but I'd been clear that I didn't want to make a documentary, a drama documentary, a dramatized story or anything like that. But that's how he wanted to do it at that time, which I understood. He had just finished the book, he was in control and he wanted to remain in control of this extraordinary story. So, we had parted company.

I wrote a treatment. And that was always the way I wanted to do it: an intense, first-person story where you go into the canyon with him and you stay with him. Aron wanted to be interviewed a bit like in "Touching the Void". He wanted the people to be interviewed (like his mom). He wanted someone to play him in the dramatized sections, but he wanted the interviewee to take you through it so he keeps control of it. That's absolutely understandable.

We obviously had a big success with "Slumdog Millionaire". That helped Aron understand that he'd be in good hands. But also he changed as a person in the three years that passed. He was more able to handle the idea that we wanted his advice and help, but he would not overshadow the actor. That was the big thing I wanted. We had him on the set and said he was always welcome, but I didn't want him hovering around the whole time. He needed to trust me and the actor. It's hard because Aron's not from our world.





"127 Hours" director Danny Boyle (left) and James Franco.
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

HollywoodChicago.com: Considering the events that unfolded in the canyon that day, Aron today obviously has a fresh perspective on life. But why can't we live life to the fullest *before* we have a death-defying experience?

Boyle: That always has been my take on it. The danger with a documentary is that it would reaffirm the superficial view of the story, which is that it's a superhero story. And America does love those stories of extreme and extraordinary individualism. [Boyle was born in Manchester, England.]

I never saw it like that. I always thought it was much more as you described it. He's actually just one of us. What you're watching is not a superhuman doing something that you can't do. What you're watching is a guy who thinks he's "Iron Man" going in, but he's humbled by the experience and he's shown that he's just one of us. Also, we're just like him.

It all boils down to the same thing. You've got to treat other people with respect because you're just one of them. There's a commonality that's much stronger than all individualism and within that commonality is this will to live. And it's shared within all species. It's not something that just benefits that extreme individual.

HollywoodChicago.com: Aron's experience inspires him to take his potentially deadly situation to extreme measures so he can survive even if it meant that *every* piece of him didn't leave that canyon. Would we all have done what Aron did or was Aron special?

Boyle: I personally think we all would do what Aron did, but I think lots of us would have died trying. I think he got lucky as well. His delay reduced his blood loss and he didn't bleed out as much. And he bumps into a Dutch couple and got lucky. That horseshoe canyon was deserted for weeks on end. Aron just happened to have found them while they were taking pictures of those petroglyphs.

I don't think he'd have climbed out of that canyon on his own. Aron was very, very close to dying. He admits that. In his book, he says he was about 15 minutes away from dying from the blood loss, dehydration, general exhaustion and shock to his body.

HollywoodChicago.com: As for the climatic arm scene, you could have shot it a number of different ways. But you chose to show it head on. What was your mindset in how you filmed that scene?

Boyle: It's very accurate to the book. His chapter when he describes it in the book is brilliant. It's a true experience. You can just tell it's direct channeling of a real experience onto the page. I wanted to capture that. I wanted to make sure people didn't think it just happened (*Boyle snaps a thumb with his middle finger*) like that. It took him more than 40 minutes to do it. It's not quick. In the film, there are shots of his watch to map how long it took him.

Women go through it obviously at childbirth, but there was pain involved in this beyond what most men will ever experience. I wanted to show that. I didn't want to sensationalize it, but (our bodies) are extraordinary machines that we live in. We take them for granted. But you try to cut off a bit of them and you realize how extraordinary of a thing we live in.



Left to right: James Franco, Kate Mara and Amber Tamblyn in "127 Hours".

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

HollywoodChicago.com: ...and Aron couldn't even cut. He had to stab himself.

Boyle: Yes. He blunted the big blade completely. He says in the book that he couldn't find his Swiss army knife in the beginning. He kept this other one [that he used] in the car for emergency use. It was a cheap knockoff that his mom got him at Christmas (like a stocking stuffer).

HollywoodChicago.com: [Edward Norton's new film "Stone"](#) [17] recently opened on the first day of the 2010 Chicago International Film Festival. "127 Hours" was almost a one-man film in one very small, claustrophobic space (the canyon).

And in "Stone," you also have Norton with Robert De Niro in one very small office for most of the film. You had to make that interesting and you put James Franco in his head a lot. How'd you deal with filming mostly in such a small, maddening environment?

Boyle: It doesn't work all the time in film, but the reductive element of cinema is really interesting to me. Everyone assumes that cinema is expansive and we want to see more and more of everything.

Unlike television, you voluntarily entrap yourself when you buy your ticket to the theater. For you to walk out, it has to be really terrible or offensive. It's a black box and you put yourself in it. I've always wanted to make a confinement film. I've tried to make a couple other confinement films earlier and they didn't work out. I love that sense of how reductive everything is and how expressive the camera can be if you have a great actor.

But you *have* to have a great actor because it's so penetrative. There's no relief. You can't really use makeup because it's so close. It's so unremitting. You can only get away with things so much by cutting away, but there's nothing to cut away from here. He didn't even have a view. It's not a wilderness film. He basically couldn't see anything. He could just see a bit of the blue sky.

HollywoodChicago.com: So you chose to have him flash forward into a future of his that doesn't even happen...

Boyle: Yes. What would it have been like if he had gotten to that party? What did they say about Scooby-Doo? What did that girl say? You'd be trying to remember because you usually treat things so casually. You'd be obsessed because there was nothing to do. Even though he's very practical and he tried to keep himself busy, he still had hours with nothing to do.



"127 Hours" star James Franco.

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

HollywoodChicago.com: In "127 Hours," you again chose to use the writer (Simon Beaufoy) and a producer (Christian Colson) from "Slumdog Millionaire". You went from filming the massive cities in India with "Slumdog Millionaire" to the minuscule milieu of a small canyon in "127 Hours".

Boyle: That's a nice contrast, yes, but we brought the same equipment. We used the same camera techniques in this that we used in "Slumdog". Having learned how to use them in a chaotic city, it was interesting to have that skill to try to make this space alive. Obviously he's static and he's still, but I didn't want the film to be inert. I've always thought of it as an action movie even though he can't move. It needed to be full of momentum, purpose and a journey all the time in as many ways as we could make it. But in the end, none of that matters. It's the actor who sustains you and keeps you going.

HollywoodChicago.com: "127 Hours" and "Slumdog Millionaire" are both about beating impossible odds. What compels you to that kind of struggle?

Boyle: I love that in cinema. It doesn't matter whether it's directly inspiring (and "127 Hours" is in many ways), but it does inspire you. I like that it gives you that charge. Many other art forms can't do that. They're more meditative or thoughtful. This is like music. It's like when you hear a great new pop song and you think... *f*ckin' eh!* I've just listened to this new folk group out of Britain called Mumford & Sons and it's like... *f*ckin' eh! What?! That's folk music?! What have I been missing all my life?* And it just charges you...

HollywoodChicago.com: The conclusion to "127 Hours" isn't what many people might expect for this kind of true story. It's not like "Into the Wild" at all.

Boyle: Yeah, that guy (played by Emile Hirsch) *really* was isolated. He was so isolated that the film inferred he couldn't get back when he changed his mind and wanted to get back. This is a wilderness, but "127 Hours" really isn't a wilderness movie. It could have happened anywhere.

It's about a guy who was absolutely stopped in his tracks and made to look at himself properly to see what he's really capable of. He thinks he's capable of anything at the beginning, but it asks him what he's really capable of. He thinks nothing could hurt him in the beginning. He has a big tumble off his bike when we start off and he just laughs and takes a picture of himself. But it turns out he's not invincible.

"127 Hours" stars James Franco, Kate Mara, Amber Tamblyn, Sean Bott, K Coleman Stinger, Treat Williams, John Lawrence, Kate Burton, Bailee Michelle Johnson, Rebecca C. Olson, Parker Hadley, Clémence Poésy, Fenton Quinn and Lizzy Caplan from director Danny Boyle and writers Danny Boyle and Simon Beaufoy. The film, which will open in Chicago on Nov. 12, 2010, is rated "R" for language and some disturbing/violent content and bloody images. It has a running time of 93 minutes.



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