

## Interview: Nat Faxon, Jim Rash Direct ‘The Way, Way Back’

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CHICAGO – Nat Faxon and Jim Rash are nothing if not spontaneous beings. Upon accepting their Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar, which they shared with Alexander Payne for the 2011 critical darling, “The Descendants,” they struck a comical pose, satirizing presenter Angelina Jolie’s leggy posture. It was a small moment, but it provided the dreary telecast with its biggest laugh.

While making “Descendants,” the Groundlings vets-turned-filmmaking duo studied how Payne would “pull back in a scene, not allowing things to get to a saccharine, syrupy level.” They applied those lessons to their own directorial debut, “The Way, Way Back,” a Sundance smash poised to become a potential summer hit. The film stars an endearingly awkward Liam James (of AMC’s “The Killing”), as Duncan, a teenage outsider forced to spend the summer at the beach house of his bullying stepfather, Trent (an uncharacteristically cold Steve Carell). As Duncan finds himself drifting away from his mother, Pam (Toni Collette), he befriends Owen (Sam Rockwell), a cheerfully anarchic water park manager, as well as a budding love interest, Susanna (AnnaSophia Robb).

Faxon and Rash spoke (and riffed) with Hollywood Chicago about everything from crushes and sunblock to the memories that define our lives.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Looking back on your own formative years while writing “The Descendants” and “The Way, Way Back,” what would you want to change most about your adolescence?

**Jim Rash:** If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn’t stress as much as I did over things that, now looking back, weren’t really that important.

**Nat Faxon:** Do you stress? [laughs]

**Rash:** No, not at all. I’m not at all a neurotic person.

**Faxon:** I would strive to have a bit more individuality as a teen. I did in certain aspects of my life, but in other things, I conformed and created an identity rather than flow the way I was supposed to flow.

**Rash:** Sounds like you only wanted to be popular and follow the crowd. There was no time when you were an individual—even now!

**Faxon:** It’s true. People naturally want to follow me.



Filmmakers Jim Rash and Nat Faxon on the set of *The Way, Way Back*.

*Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Is Owen the guardian angel you wish you had met as a teen?

**Rash:** I think, in a way, yeah. We thought of who could be our “Bill Murray from ‘Meatballs’” in Hollywood today, and Sam fits that bill completely. He’s so likable and so full of charm, and in real life, is also very social and warm. He has those qualities that you hope everyone has—whether it’s a teacher or a relative or someone at a water park. I think we’d all love to have that sort of person in our lives.

**Faxon:** I had a little bit of that growing up. I had an older cousin, Josh, who was about four years older than I was. There were certainly moments where he would bring me along and let me hang out with the older kids, or introduce me to girls, or let me go surfing with him and his buddies during the summer. So there were certain qualities, that inclusiveness and guidance, that I think were incorporated into Owen.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Did your background in improv influence your approach to directing?

**Rash:** We came through the Groundlings program at the exact same time that Maya did. She was a friend before we got into all this. We brought her in for that purpose. Sam and Steve also have a background in improv. We wanted an atmosphere that allowed people to explore, but honestly, we were shooting on such an intense schedule that we couldn’t afford to do multiple takes of long improvisations, and then turn the camera around and get all that goodness on the other side. Improv movies usually have two or three cameras operating at the same time, but we were shooting with one. Our budget only allowed us to have two cameras on certain days, and those would be reserved for days when we needed a Steadicam. There was improv in the water park sequences, but when it came to most of the house stuff, it pretty much sticks to the script.

**Faxon:** It was more of a function of time and schedule than it was a creative one. If we didn’t get what we needed during a given shooting day, we were in trouble.

**Rash:** We would throw out lines to the actors as well, and would keep honing the script during shooting. There are definitely lines that are improvised.

**Faxon:** Plus, we had to let Sam dance at least once. It should be in his contract.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the challenge of shooting at a water park? Was it open to customers?

**Faxon:** It was. We shot at Water Wizz, which is the name of the actual park in Wareham, Massachusetts, and was the perfect fit. It was a smaller, family-run place that didn’t feel so small that you wouldn’t want to go there, and it wasn’t so huge that it would feel like a massive, corporate place that didn’t have a communal sense to it. It was the [ideal] size, and they allowed us to shoot in certain parts of the water park. We didn’t have the budget to shut the whole place down for weeks nor did they want to shut it down for that amount of time. So literally all of those people in the water park were actual patrons who had come to spend the day there, and we would take over one slide and say, “You may be seen in the background.” [laughs]

**Rash:** We had a small group of background actors and sometimes we would use the PA system to get more people over for larger scenes.

**Faxon:** We had our PAs and interns dressed up as Water Wizz employees controlling people so that if they were seen, it would just look like



they were a part of the park. When we were editing the film, we realized that it was impossible to cut out every shot of someone's eyes wandering toward the camera.

**Rash:** We hope the audience will think that they're just watching Owen.

**Faxon:** He's just that magnetic.



Zoe Levin, Steve Carell, Toni Collette, Sam Rockwell and Liam James star in Jim Rash and Nat Faxon's *The Way, Way Back*.

*Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What particular aspirations do you both have, as writers?

**Rash:** Writers are always pursuing restraint. They're always chasing that idea of saying more with less. We wrote "The Way, Way Back" before we got the "Descendants" job, and that was a great experience for us. We've always been grounded in interesting stories that have a certain heightened element, and the water park is sort of like Oz. A change of venue changes everyone's mood.

**Faxon:** We're still working with the [same principles] that the Groundlings instilled in us. We write about people that we know—our co-workers and friends—and get as specific as we can about them. We make sure that they have flaws and that they don't always make the best decisions. Sometimes those decisions can have tragic consequences in a comedic or dramatic way. We strive to make something that's real and relatable.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is your approach to writing young characters? Do you have children?

**Rash:** Nat has children, but they're many years away from becoming teens. I think that it's really about connecting with what you remember. Obviously, things change and children today are different from how you were at their age, but at the core, we all understand pain. When you're Duncan's age, everything comes out as anger. You have to vent. Kids want to find someone who doesn't speak down to them. We're all still growing and maturing and evolving, but children are, for the most part, not developed yet. They haven't experienced things, or maybe they've experienced them too soon and can't process it. Duncan has two male figures in his life who are giving him the same message in a totally different way. Trent's message is, "Get out there and meet people. Don't stick around." In other words, "get out." Owen says the exact same thing, but the [translation] is, "come in." It's nature versus nurture.

**Faxon:** Kids are smart, and that's how we like to write them. They have more mature thoughts than you think. You don't want their dialogue to sound basic or general. You want to write it in a more intellectual way because that's the way kids are. They're constantly outthinking you.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** The casting of Liam James was fitting in that he truly resembles an outsider alongside such familiar faces.

**Rash:** We always knew that Duncan would be a discovery. It helps the movie to have someone new and fresh so that the audience would feel like they're getting to know him. We lucked out but it was a challenge. We didn't have as much time to do a huge country-wide search. Liam came to us via Vancouver.

**Faxon:** He innately had that quality we wanted—first off, physically. He walked in the room and it just felt very right. The concaveness of his chest, the slumped shoulders, the paleness, the shuffle...we thought, "If this kid can say anything close to the correct manner, we got the kid."



**Rash:** Even with Liam, there was this glimmer that you see in kids of what they can become. When you finally see Duncan as a person who’s confident, Liam was too. He got to know us and he really bonded with Sam. You could see their closeness just in the way that Liam would talk about AnnaSophia Robb. You could tell that he had a huge crush on her. They are different in age, which works for the movie and is by design. She’s in a different place, even though it’s a three-year age difference between them.



Liam James and Sam Rockwell star in Jim Rash and Nat Faxon’s *The Way, Way Back*.

*Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Jim, did you lose weight for this role? You look like you’re in much better health today.

**Rash:** The T-shirts did me no favors. I said right at the beginning that I wanted the largest T-shirt they had. I don’t look great in the film, that’s for sure. It was a great, amazing experience, but the amount of stress probably resulted in me not eating very much. [laughs] I watch myself in the party scene and think, “God Lord, I look like I’m half dead.” But it all worked out since my character hates his job, but also loves it at the same time. As an actor, you always have to prove yourself because if you play a certain character for a long enough time, like on “Community,” you’ll always be thought of as “the persnickety guy.” It was very important for me to do something as different as I could in this film, at least energy-wise.

**Faxon:** I think you also allowed yourself to use 30 sunblock rather than 80.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is the value of nostalgia?

**Rash:** It gives you perspective. The nugget that we started with ended up becoming the very first scene. It was a true story from my life. I had a conversation with my stepfather who said that he would rate me a 3 on a scale from 1 to 10. As a performer, I embrace all of the things from my life that are now amusing to me. You waste too much time by allowing yourself to be traumatized by those memories. Nostalgia is about opening yourself up for discussion. We’re interested in what motivates characters to do what they do. At Sundance, a woman was really nailing us with the question of how Trent could be such a d—k and how Pam could still be with him. She wouldn’t let it go. Steve did a funny bit where he was like, “You really hate me.” Finally, we said, “We embrace this question.” There’s a notion that characters must change by the end of the film, but I’d be surprised if everyone in your life has changed or come full circle or evolved as much as you want them to. We conceived of Trent as a tragic male character stuck in a cycle that he’s created for himself. [to Nat] Do you have a better, shorter answer to that question?

**Faxon:** I did about half an hour ago.

*‘The Way, Way Back’ stars Liam James, Sam Rockwell, Annasophia Robb, Steve Carell, Toni Collette, Maya Rudolph, Allison Janney, Rob Corddry, Amanda Peet, Jim Rash and Nat Faxon. It was written and directed by Nat Faxon and Jim Rash. It opened on July 5th, 2013, at local theaters. It is rated PG-13.*



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