

## Interview: Daniel Scheinert, Daniel Kwan Open a 'Swiss Army Man'

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CHICAGO – In what truly must be one of the most original and odd ideas for a movie in awhile, “Swiss Army Man” is opening in Chicago this week, and features Daniel “Harry Potter” Radcliffe as a dead corpse that helps a man survive. This scenario was concocted by writer/directors Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan.

These dudes are the “Two Daniels,” and have been creative partners since they were post-grads (story below) and have made their mark this decade in music video, receiving two Grammy nominations. They made a groundbreaking interactive short film in 2014 called “Possibilia,” which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, and went hugely viral with the video “Turn Down for What” (for DJ Snake and Lil John). “Swiss Army Man” is their first feature film, and they added another Daniel (Radcliffe) to the mix, while creating a debut that – despite its inherent weirdness – will certainly make a mark.



It's Takes Two: Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert of 'Swiss Army Man'

Photo credit: A24

HollywoodChicago.com got the opportunity to talk with the writer/director “Daniel” duo before the release date of “Swiss Army Man” in Chicago – this Friday, July 1st, 2016.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** When you both were formulating the abilities that your 'Swiss Army Man' would have, what were the justifications for the abilities that made it into the film, and what were some of them that were discarded, and why?

**Daniel Scheinert:** It took us awhile to figure out the inner logic for his abilities. The focus came about toward the end of the first part of the writing process, when we figured out what the film would be about. One of the rules was we wanted the film to address shame, and how that state of being can keep us from love.

Once we had that nailed down, then we focused on his powers. Those abilities were all boxed up in the shame theme, as the more embarrassing the action – with our own bodily functions – the more we could highlight how ashamed we are, despite everyone having these functions. We wanted them as powers rather than shame.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What about what didn't work?

**Scheinert:** We had a lot of other ideas that were fun, but didn't fit in that theme. There was a scene where they were falling off a waterfall, and as they are falling Hank [Paul Dano] remembers that Manny [Radcliffe] is allergic to bees. So as they are falling, he snatches a bee out of the air and stabs Manny with it, inflating him to a giant raft. Then they float down the river to safety. I wanted to build a giant, inflatable Daniel Radcliffe. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since this is your first major film release, and your premise was so unusual, what moment in the pitching and financing process was the breakthrough, and how did it fall into place after that?

**Scheinert:** We'd already had done enough short films and music videos, that even before we started pitching they saw that the story, even though strange, had a lot of heart. In some ways, having all of what we'd done before was fodder for the pitch. While we were talking to financiers, "Turn Down for What" came out and that did really well on YouTube [400 million downloads]. At the same time, we were accepted in the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, which made it a lot easier for financiers to figure out what we're doing. Overall, it wasn't easy, but that part is always difficult.

**Daniel Kwan:** That was the- one-two punch – "Turn Down for What" and the Screenwriters Lab – that legitimized all those meetings we were having.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Daniel Radcliffe and Paul Dano had to find a chemistry that was totally different from the usual fellow-actor-type-performance interaction. At what point in the production process do you believe they had a major breakthrough as far as how they would be intertwining the characters?

**Scheinert:** It really came the first day of rehearsal, because before that we'd spent a lot of time chatting about the premise of the film. I do vividly remember, one or two days before we started shooting, that it clicked the first time all four of us were in a room together. That was when they realized that less was more, and that they had a natural chemistry. The more simply and honestly they could work, the better. The absurd content spoke for itself, all they needed to do was ground it with an emotional reality.

**Kwan:** I think if one of them had been a little hesitant it would have made the whole thing uncomfortable. But because they were both excited, and understood the unique challenges of these characters, they were open to whatever the relationship needed. They were both emotionally open, and also physically willing, to do what was necessary to make it work.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Your film operates in several planes of existence. When formulating the final cut, were you cognizant of which plane you were on, or did you just allow the storytelling that emerged define the states of being?

**Scheinert:** We were constantly debating what plane of existence we were in, at any given scene. 99% of the time we felt that emotional clarity was most important, and we had to get rid of some really funny things so that the film had an emotional spine. Sometimes we had to throw logic out the window, and sometime comedy got cut.

But there were key scenes where we got the opportunity to do something that was self aware, to wink at the audience. Like in the open credit sequence – 'that's Daniel Radcliffe!' We knew that was a moment where we could have some fun. That was a wink, but most of the movie there was no winking, even though we were tempted. [laughs]

**Kwan:** I think with this film it's left for the audience to interpret things, because it was most important that the characters were able to find a connection. If an individual learns something from that, it doesn't matter what the rest of world believes. It's a litmus test – if you believe it's all in Hank's head, that's more cynical, or if you believe it's actually happening, then there may be some magic in the world. It's a reflection of your own personal outlook.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Basically most of the movie took place in the mud and dirt of the ever-shrinking "woods." How did the elements of earth, air, fire and water play into what you were communicating in the story?

**Scheinert:** The reason we put those elements through the characters, is that we wanted to talk about society, without being in society. It was fun to realize how ridiculous our world is, while two guys are out looking for food. That juxtaposition was the fun dissonance. Neither of us are particular outdoorsy. It was kind of self deprecating in that way – this was not a film made by two Eagle Scouts. [laughs] We wouldn't be able to survive in the woods.

**Kwan:** The 'elements' part of the question is interesting, because I don't think that was something that consciously focused on, it just naturally came out of the story and characters. It just made sense and we kept going with it. It ended up being about what is essential in all of us, the flatulence and the need for water.

As their relationship built physically and emotionally, it became natural to check off what Hank would need from Manny to survive. The last



thing, of course, is hope. Once you get past water, shelter, food and clothing, it's time to think about that element of life called hope – because if you don't have it, you don't survive.



Guess Who's Washing Ashore? Paul Dano and Daniel Radcliffe of 'Swiss Army Man'

Photo credit: A24

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is the origin of your partnership. How did two guys named Daniel morph into the 'Two Daniels'?

**Scheinert:** The abbreviated version was that although we went to the same college, we actually connected afterward, when we were acquaintances that both worked at a summer camp, and we both were the most hyper teaching assistants in camp.

**Kwan:** We'd shoot extra movies with the kids because we were having fun.

**Scheinert:** In many ways, that camp is what I wished film school was. Just make stuff, make stuff, make stuff. [laughs] From there, we accidentally became a director duo because some of the stuff we made together went over well on the internet. We just kept making more shorts, and finally a year later put a label on it. 'I guess we're both directors. Let's become a duo and make up a name.'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** For both of you, let's do a group therapy-type exercise. For each Daniel, what does the other Daniel bring to the creative partnership, for this film?

**Scheinert:** After we went through the Sundance Labs, and got encouraged to pour our hearts into the movie, I think Kwan really poured his deep secret part of himself into the movie, with the idea of the body shame theme. It's funny, but it also speaks to something deeper. He contributed the part of the film that intuitively really jumped off the cliff.

**Kwan:** Scheinert is so much more uncompromising in protecting his vision than I am, and more than most people. That bleeds into the scenes that are harder to describe, and goes to how we pre-produce, and how we work in collaboration. That has always been a big part of our process, and it always reminds us of why we make films the way we make them. He's much more of a process person that I am, and that helps to balance everything.

*"Swiss Army Man" opens nationwide on July 1st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Daniel Radcliffe, Paul Dano, Mary Elizabeth Winstead and Richard Gross. Screenplay by Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan. Directed by Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan. Rated "R"*



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