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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

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# Heartbeats and the Rise of Xavier Dolan

Inspiring Funny Hot Scary Outrageous Amazing Weird Crazy

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Sometimes, a director can become a film festival star long before they reach the general public. Usually, it means their work is so esoteric or avant-garde that it's just not likely to ever appeal to a mainstream audience. (See Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the very definition of an art house director.) But in the case of Canadian writer, director and actor Xavier Dolan it's just a curious case of missed opportunities by distributors and audiences. Dolan is clearly a major talent who makes movies that smart audiences will embrace. They just need the chance to see his work. That's finally happening with *Heartbeats*, his sexy, witty second film that's [opening on Friday at the IFC Center in New York](#).

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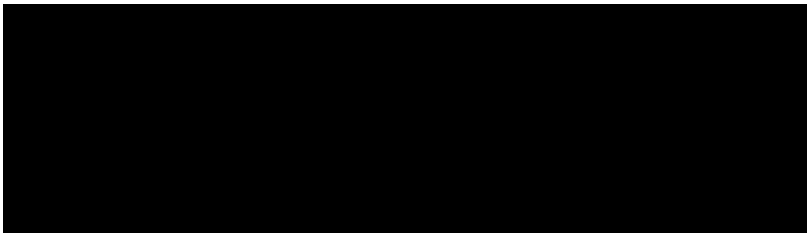
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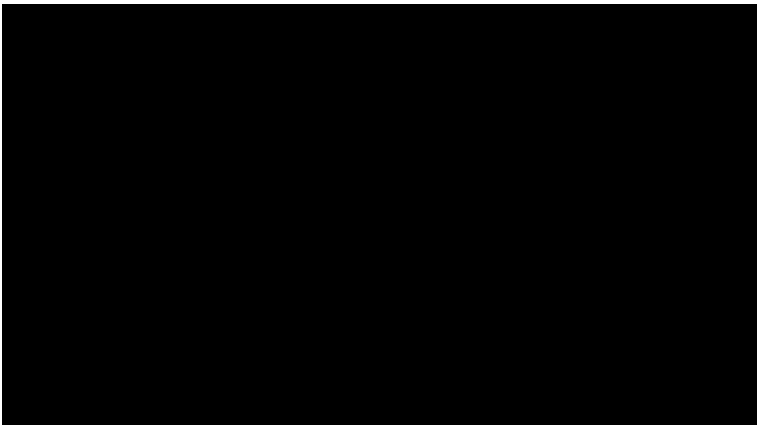
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It's a long overdue commercial debut for Dolan, who burst onto the scene via the Cannes Film Festival in 2009 with *I Killed My Mother*. Below you'll find the article I wrote at the time to introduce Dolan. It was held and held while the film was inexplicably delayed again and again and never got a decent US theatrical debut. (It did open in Canada, where Dolan is from.) The article never made it to print because the movie never made it to audiences. But first, here's my review of *Heartbeats* at Cannes and some video of Dolan talking about his work. Enjoy.

**LES AMOURS IMAGINAIRES/HEARTBEATS** \*\* out of \*\*\*\* -- One of my most highly anticipated films of the fest is both a mild disappointment and a step forward for its director, Xavier Dolan. He had a smashing debut last year at Cannes with the blackly humorous drama *I Killed My Mother*. It won three top prizes at the Directors Fortnight and was one of the major hits of the fest. (It went on to acclaim in Canada and festivals around the world.) This year, his second film played *Un Certain Regard*, which is where young filmmakers go on their way up and elder statesmen go on their way down. At this rate, Dolan will be in Competition with a film in the next few years. Let's certainly hope so. His new movie, which has the godawful English title *Heartbeats* when *The Imaginary Lovers* is far better, is a bisexual *Jules & Jim* with a dash of Wong Kar Wai thrown in for good measure. The movie is interspersed with people talking about their doomed romances in faux documentary style, with an Almodovar-esque beauty (the actress has a wonderfully angular face) especially memorable. Then we meet best friends Francis (Dolan) and Marie (Monia Chokri). He's gay and makes little slashes on his bathroom wall every time a guy turns him down for a relationship (really? 40+ guys wouldn't want him?) and she wears vintage clothing and hangs out with him while they run down everyone in sight. Like a dappled deer, in wanders Nicolas (Niels Schneider), a tall curly-haired Adonis who loves ingenuously flirting with both of them. He shares a bed with the two friends -- innocently of course -- and is then surprised when they both develop crushes. The film is a tug of war between the two, with Nicolas either bemused or unaware of their desire. Mostly it's an excuse for Dolan to develop his skills as a filmmaker. *I Killed My Mother* was accomplished and had some nice framing of its characters but was by and large dialogue driven. *Les Amours Imaginaires* is a huge leap forward stylistically with Dolan telling much of the story through visuals. He goes a bit overboard, with some scenes playing like music videos, and his choice of classical music cues are far more cliched than his taste in pop. But if he's to become a great filmmaker, these are exactly the sort of talents he needs to develop. Dolan and Chokri are inherently appealing, but the audience should be given more reason to care for them; they're so busy being sour and dissing each other that we don't get to warm up to them like we should. The eye candy of Nicolas should just be an excuse for them to spar as only friends can. And Dolan uses the Wong Kar Wai trick of repeating a pop song over and over and over again but only proves how difficult that can be to pull off. He also finds the perfect ending -- a nice visual moment -- only to tack on a coda that is thoroughly unnecessary. The movie looks great but seems to have been made on a dime (if that makes any sense), which is another good sign. Hopefully Dolan -- who is also acting in other films -- will continue making movies at a furious pace and keep pushing himself to grow artistically. He's got a great film in him and perhaps a great career as well.

And here is video of my chat with Dolan at the Toronto Film Festival.



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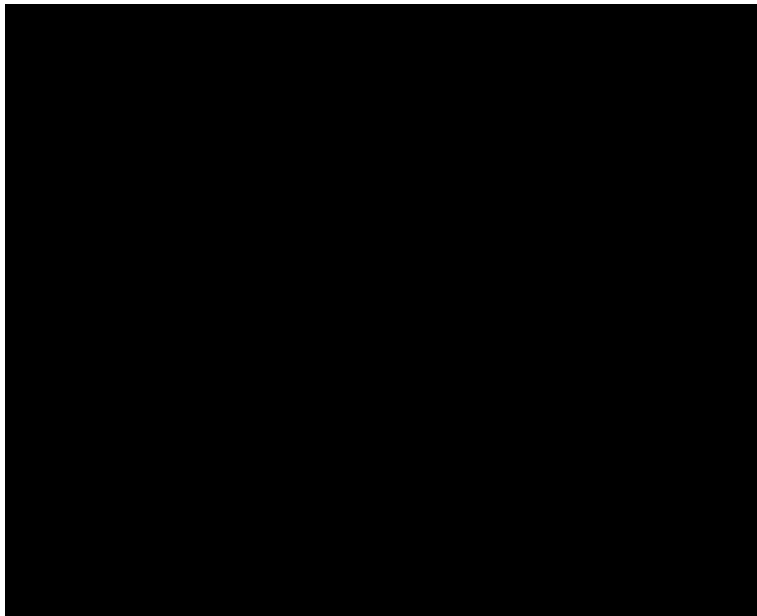
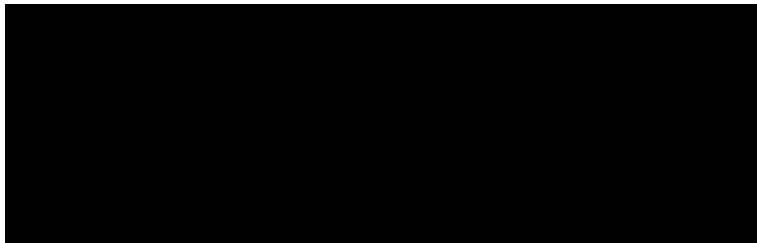


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### MATRICIDE MOVIE WINS PLAUDITS AT CANNES

Montreal's out actor-director Xavier Dolan triumphs at Cannes

#### CANNES

By Michael Giltz

At a Cannes Film Festival dominated by veterans like Pedro Almodovar, Ang Lee, Lars Von Trier and Michael Haneke, one of the break out successes was 20-year-old Xavier Dolan, who triumphed at the Directors Fortnight with his debut feature *I Killed My Mother*. Dolan wrote, directed, initially bankrolled and stars in the film, which garnered three top prizes, including best French language film and best first or second movie (their version of the Camera d'or).

Chatting with wit and charm in English (though French is his native tongue), the suitably disheveled Dolan (scruffy one-day growth on his chin, hair flopping about magnificently), sat at the private beach area of the Hotel Majestic, discussing his meteoric success with the waves crashing in the background.

"I wrote the script in three days, a first draft, very rude, very dense," says Dolan. "It was really rough. That was in October, 2006. I just wanted to evacuate some anger, some hatred that I had towards my adolescence and my mother. It went awry, I put it in a drawer and forgot about it. Then in 2008 I took it out and decided to rewrite it."

So while technically the project has been three years in the works, it still seems to have come together with remarkable ease.

"Wrote it 17, filmed 19, and giving this interview, 20" he laughs in agreement.

The film is a brutally funny look at a maddeningly precocious teenager and his long-suffering single mother. Hubert (played by Dolan) criticizes the way she eats, the way she dresses, the way she drives, the channel she listens to on the radio and on and on. His mom (a terrific Anne Dorval, who looks somewhat like Shirley MacLaine circa *The Apartment*) may not get his reference to Jackson Pollock, but she's not a disaster as a mom. Hubert is genuinely cruel, but he's so funny about it you can't help laughing. On the other hand, if his mom decided to take Medea as a role model, you'd understand completely.

Complicating matters is his indifferent father, exile to a boarding school when his grades fall, and a damned cute boyfriend that Hubert's mom knows nothing about. (Their scene of making love while painting is the only one Dolan edited on his own; it's quite sexy and indicates that perhaps the director



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doesn't always want to be in control.) Is Hubert really angry at his dad but lashing out at his mother because she's the only one around? Is he pushing her away in anticipation of being rejected when he comes out? Is he just a cranky teen with an unusually sharp tongue?

One of the strengths of the film is how our sympathies grow for both Hubert and his mother, not to mention how the film begins in comedy and then gets more serious and darker (without losing the humor). Variety calls it a "genuine crowdpleaser" with "much to praise," though very much a first effort. The Hollywood Reporter said it was "uneven but funny" and "audacious" but centered most of all on Dolan, whom it said has "an exuberant cinematic and comic imagination."

In short, it's a remarkable success when literally hundreds of films come and go at Cannes and don't attract the slightest attention. And it's a gamble that paid off: Dolan sank hundreds of thousands of Canadian dollars of his own money into making the \$350,000 (Canadian) film.

Dolan didn't inherit a trust fund: it was money he'd been saving from a series of commercials he acted in when he was a little boy.

"I did 21 commercials for this drug store chain called Jean Coutu," explains Dolan. "I was running around the aisles and I was kind of evil, grinning and laughing and destroying almost everything in my way and it was quite funny. This is not really serious, but it did start everything and [thanks to the money he made from it] made everything possible after."

He would have continued acting, but his isolation at a boarding school in the country made that virtually impossible.

"All the auditions were very far," says Dolan, who cites films like *Death In Venice* and *My Own Private Idaho* as major inspirations. "I did audition but the lack of availability made casting directors not angry, but forget me. When you're not free, you don't exist anymore."

Besides, as an awkward adolescent, even when he did make an audition, he never seemed to fit the image they wanted.

"I still did auditions but it was the same thing: too old, too small, too tall, too young. I got bored of hearing that."

So, naturally, Dolan wrote his own screenplay and showed it to an actress friend, Suzanne Clement (who plays a friendly teacher in the film). Her encouragement gave him the impetus to keep working on the film and sink his life savings into it.

"Everything," says Dolan, whose floppy curly black hair makes him look like a Romantic poet or perhaps Johnny Depp in his *21 Jump Street* period. "Every dime. I have no regrets. I'm here, talking to you."

He also has no regrets about mining his personal life for the screenplay, including a gay bashing at boarding school.

"I've always been gay," says Dolan. "Being a kid I always dressed in my mom's clothes or had things with other guys but I never thought that meant I was homosexual. I had girlfriends at primary school which was cute, I guess. I was excited by girls. But then at the end of primary school, elementary school I mean, I would start to think about guys a bit. And then in high school, it became obvious and I was really unhappy about that."

"The bashing scene was something inspired by reality. That was the entrance into gayness. They said, 'You fucking fag,' so it was pretty clear [why they were beating him]. I'd been there two years. What's pretty amazing is that I never told anyone at the school [I was gay]. But apparently for them it seemed obvious. But I'm not that effeminate. Seriously, I'm not the fabulous guy. It's ok, but it's not me. Was it so obvious? I always had a doubt. Maybe they'd seen me doing something? I think I kissed someone one day and I think that they saw this."

That'll do it, I suggested. "That'll do it, I think," he agreed.

Expansive, and funny and self-deprecating about his English, the one pensive moment came when I asked him if his mother had seen the film yet.

"She hasn't seen it," he says. "She will. Not yet. Before the premiere in Montreal. For the moment she hasn't seen it."

Will that be awkward? Even though the film ultimately has warmth for both mother and son Hubert

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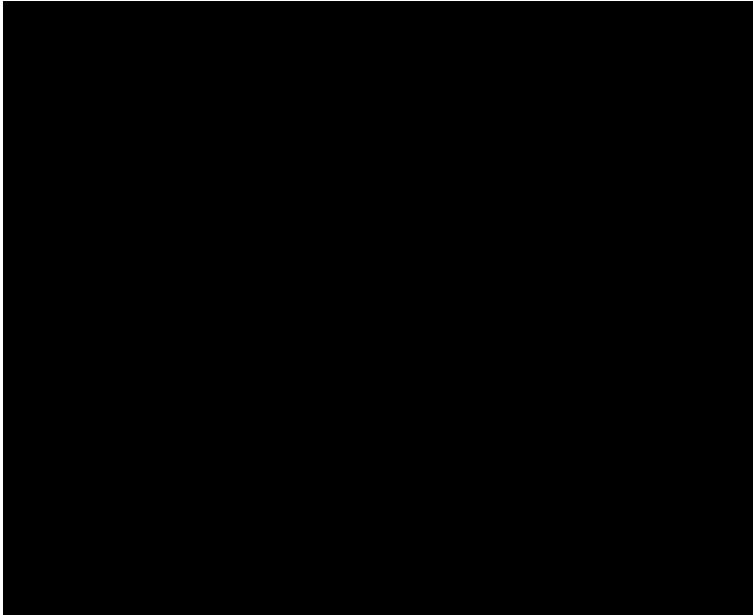
clearly gets all the funniest and meanest lines. "No. It'll be fine."

At that Montreal premiere, Dolan might just go with friends since he's not in a serious relationship. I asked if he was dating anyone.

"No," he said.

Surely the movie will change that? "I'm really difficult; I'm really picky," he smiles. "And I'm just unbearable."

Here's one of the string of ads Dolan made for a Canadian drug store chain. He would later use the money earned on these shoots to self-finance his first film.



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