

The life of Ryan

With another box-office hit under his belt and a baby daughter at home, life is looking good for Hollywood superstar Ryan Gosling, writes **Harold Von Kursk**

Ryan Gosling is a natural born iconoclast. Raised by a single mother in his native town of Cornwall, Ontario, he also spent considerable time absorbing life lessons in the company of his older sister, Mandi. That may well account for his easy-going manner with women and the kind of sensitivity he brings to his screen romances. Apart from his Oscar-nominated performance in *Half Nelson*, Gosling's work in *The Notebook*, *Blue Valentine*, and *Drive* has revealed his abiding passion, curiosity, and appreciation for the opposite sex.

"I grew up with two incredible women — my mother and sister — and naturally my way of looking at the world was shaped by a female perspective," Gosling says. "I'm sure it made me very protective and caring with women and I've always enjoyed their company and that kind of emotional openness. That's also the kind of fundamental quality you need to bring to your work as an actor."

The 35-year-old has recently embarked on two distinct new

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paths in life. First, he's the proud father of a baby girl, Esmerelda, born in September 2014 to Gosling and his girlfriend of the past three years, actress Eva Mendes. Second, he made his directorial debut at Cannes last May with *Lost River*, a stark melodrama that featured his *Drive* co-star, Christina Hendricks, in the lead role. Though critics savaged the film and it was only released in a few territories, Gosling is determined to keep pushing boundaries.

Despite his *matinée* idol looks and sex symbol status, Gosling would rather work in *auteur* projects as opposed to taking eight-figure pay cheques for big budget studio films.

"The whole notion of being a movie star is part of the myth-making process that goes on in the film business. You create this great illusion on screen and then the illusion is taken to a different level when actors become mythologised.

"I don't even think of myself as particularly good looking and not at all a typical, kind of Hollywood leading man sort of actor," cautions Gosling. "I think I have a greater affinity for characters who aren't mainstream, leading man kinds of roles, although I enjoy playing basically any character as long as the film has something interesting to say about life. I hate feeling that I'm just doing a job for a pay cheque. I like to think I'm being creative

and doing something meaningful as an actor and as an individual."

Gosling's outsider instincts compel him to look for the deeper subtext often found in indie films as opposed to the mind-numbing, comic-book dreck that is now the strategic cornerstone of every major Hollywood studio. That's why he has spent the last few years playing in esoteric fare such as *The Place Beyond the Pines* and *Only God Forgives* as opposed to donning multi-coloured spandex suits and fighting green monsters and sundry other fantastic alien threats to the human species.

Gosling is well aware, however, of the need to maintain a minimum level of bankability that obliges him to embrace the contradictions between art house anti-hero and Hollywood leading man. Just don't ask him to pander to his millions of female fans who would die to see him play in a sweeping love story.

"I've been fortunate to play in a few romantic films which impart a kind of romantic leading man aura onto you. I don't think that's my destiny as an actor and I'm not pursuing those kinds of roles. I'm much more into twisted romantic stories like *Blue Valentine* or offbeat kinds of characters like I play in *Drive*. But I'm open to everything as long as I see some intelligence or beauty in the script and especially when the director has a different take on the world."

His latest film, *The Big*

Right: Gosling's career has gone from strength-to-strength with his latest film, *The Big Short*, earning rave reviews

Short, was precisely the kind of unconventional mainstream film that sparked his enthusiasm. The movie has earned rave reviews, multiple awards, and grossed nearly US\$150 million at the box-office — not bad for a comedy/drama trying to explain the role of mortgage backed securities and derivatives in precipitating the 2008 global financial meltdown.

In the role of Jared Vennett, a fast-talking Wall Street investment banker, Gosling serves as the film's narrator and helps guide audiences through the complex chain of events surrounding the banking crisis that resulted from the catastrophic plunge in the sub-prime mortgage market.

Directed by Adam McKay, and based on the best-selling book by Michael Lewis, *The Big Short: Inside The Doomsday Machine*, the film also co-stars Steve Carrell, Brad Pitt and Christian Bale and benefits from the kind of ironic wit that McKay has brought to comedies like *Anchorman* and *The Other Guys*.

"This film was a massive education for me," Gosling says. "Until I read the script, I never would have imagined that you could take audiences through these events and make a compelling movie out of it... ➤"





Left: Gosling directed his *Drive* co-star Christina Hendricks in last year's *Lost River*

Below: Gosling on the red carpet with his mother, Donna

Mickey Mouse Club, an American kids' TV programme that also launched the careers of Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake. Gosling was famously fired from the series for supposedly "corrupting" the other Mousketeers, and that kind of hell-raiser attitude towards life has stayed with him ever since and clearly informs much of his work as an actor.

"I grew up in a way where I always felt, almost by definition, that I was an outsider because my world was that of a TV or movie set. I was always looking at life in a different way than other kids my age and probably I grew up with a twisted sense of what was going on in life. I like being able to think that I approach things with a heavy degree of scepticism and cynicism – it's not like politicians are telling us the truth."

Despite his unusual upbringing, Gosling has always treated his work with maximum respect and was acutely aware of how his successful career as a teenage actor helped sustain his mother and sister financially.

"I was very serious when it came to acting and earning a living. My mother and sister were dependent on me after my parents got divorced but by mom was supporting me in my career ➤

But Adam [McKay], even though he's best known for his wonderful comedies, he does something very unique with this story. He deals with some very serious issues and uses humour [to illustrate] the absurdity of how the financial markets operated and the people who were part of that process.

"My character was the one who knew that the credit default swaps were eventually going to lead to a collapse. He was someone whose job was to make money for the bank but he also had a good instinct to know when things were getting out of hand. His colleagues and bosses weren't interested in hearing him warn of the dangers involved – but he was right."

Long before he arrived in Hollywood, Gosling was honing his acting instincts by watching his uncle perform as an Elvis impersonator at various clubs in Ontario, Canada. That was his gateway into another world that fed his youthful imagination.

"I was just having fun. My uncle was a big influence, though. He was living with my family at the time for about a year and he had begun performing as an Elvis impersonator. Prior to that, the

house was pretty ordinary. My father was working in a factory and my mom stayed at home. Suddenly you're living with Elvis and your whole family gets involved. So one person is singing back-up vocals, another works as a bodyguard, and you feel like you're part of this strange new world.

"After my uncle left, though, life was pretty boring and I wanted to find a way back into

that world. So I did everything I could to get there. I took singing lessons, dancing lessons, and then auditioned for the *Mickey Mouse Club* and that was the start of it, really. Even though [the Disney people] thought I was a bad influence, I still had a great time there."

Ryan was only 13 years old when his mother moved him to Los Angeles, where he became a child star on the



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and I could never have achieved anything without her and my sister there for me. So I may have supported them financially but I didn't look at it as if I was doing anything other than what I should be doing. I saw acting as a way of making very good money compared to how my parents had struggled when my dad was working at a paper mill and my mother was a secretary. So I was happy to be helping my mother and sister. Also, I'm not stupid; acting is a pretty good gig!"

His directorial debut, *Lost River*, based on Gosling's own screenplay, was conceived as a tribute to his mother, who struggled to provide a stable and productive home life for Ryan and his older sister following her divorce from Ryan's father and her subsequent departure from the Mormon Church.

"My mom is a very beautiful woman and was a single mom," Gosling recalls. "When you're a kid and you have a single mom, all men feel like wolves. Guys would whistle at her — it was very predatory and threatening. As a kid I felt helpless, so you start to imagine all these [scenarios] where you can do something. You see the world through the filter of your imagination."

Acutely aware of the fragile nature of families, Gosling is taking his role as a father and partner to Eva Mendes very seriously these days. After romances with a variety of Hollywood actresses including his *Notebook* co-star, fellow Canadian Rachel McAdams, Gosling has found a soul mate in Mendes.

"It's an exciting time. It's really nice to be a father...I'd thought a long time about starting a family...I'm a romantic and I'm lucky to have the right woman at my side."

They've scrupulously resisted becoming a celebrity couple, preferring to avoid virtually all public appearances together. That is fully consistent with Gosling's aversion to any kind of star-worship and his desire to live as "authentically and naturally" as possible. Two years ago, he and Mendes decided to relocate to New York where he feels more creatively and culturally centred.

"I had reached a point where I couldn't live in Los Angeles anymore even though I loved the weather and the palm trees. The problem is that you spend half your life sitting in traffic and driving from one place to the next. Everything in that city seems to

be centred on the film business and it just pervades everything you do. In New York I can walk around more or less freely and it feels real there. There's such a strong sense of identity and culture to the city that you thrive on that kind of spirit. I love it."

Gosling attributes his natural reticence and resistance to the trappings of fame to his Canadian identity. He's as relaxed and unperturbed by the attention around him to the point where he confesses to being surprised when people stop him in the street and ask for selfies or autographs. Gosling spent so much of his youth observing Hollywood and its affect on young actors that he developed a lifelong immunity to all manner

of self-indulgence or delusions of Hollywood grandeur.

"Canadians are a little quieter and more circumspect. I enjoyed growing up there but I wouldn't want to live there again because it's too cold. I remember the day I was walking to school early in the morning and it was probably minus 20 outside and I saw a dead cat on the street. It was frozen solid and I just picked it up and swung it like a bat against a tree."

Fortunately for Gosling, his career looks like it has plenty more life in it than that cat. ■

Left: Gosling's varied films have ranged from political drama *The Ides of March* to romantic comedy *Crazy, Stupid, Love*

