

Official Selection

**tiff**

Toronto International  
Film Festival 2019

# TAMMY'S ALWAYS DYING

A feature film by  
**Amy Jo Johnson**



Produced by  
**Jessica Adams**  
a **JA Productions** production

Presented by  
Tajj Film Distribution Inc. & The Wonderfilm Media Corporation

Produced with the participation of:  
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**Logline:**

With a dead-end job, a pointless affair, no desirable skills and a dying manipulative mother, Catherine gets the opportunity to sell the only interesting thing about her, her miserable life story.

**Short Synopsis:**

Every month, when the welfare money runs out, 35 year-old Catherine has to talk her self-destructive mother off the ledge of the same bridge...literally. This routine has gone on for so long that it's the only thing Cathy feels she's good at. And its Tammy's selfish way of keeping hold of her daughter. When Tammy is diagnosed with terminal cancer and the possibility of life without her becomes very real, so does Cathy's repressed desire to leave her small town. Does she stay and trust the woman who has always let her down, or does she find the courage to live her own life?

## **Long Synopsis:**

On the 29th of every month, right when the welfare money runs out, Catherine talks her alcoholic mother off the ledge of the same bridge. This routine has gone on for so long that it's the only thing Cathy feels she's good at. And it's Tammy's selfish way of keeping hold of her daughter. But when Tammy is diagnosed with terminal cancer, suddenly she's not so sure she wants to die anymore.

Catherine has embraced failure. She works at the neighborhood dive bar and has terrible sex with Reggie Seamus, the same idiot she's been having terrible sex with since high school. Except now he's unhappily married with kids. The only positive force in Catherine's life is Doug, a semi-closeted friend of the family who has the unfortunate habit of always taking Tammy's side. With Tammy's diagnosis, Catherine's responsibilities become completely overwhelming.

Then a chance meeting with Ilana, a glamorous, ball-busting reality TV agent gives Catherine an alternative. She can sell her life story and experience 15 minutes of fame. She just has to wait for Tammy to die. But Tammy is responding well to treatment. The 29th comes and goes and... nothing.

Catherine is furious after an altercation with her still ferocious mother. She throws a suitcase into the back of her shit-box car and leaves for the city. To Ilana. To success. Finally, she'll get an audience for her tragedy. But Ilana isn't the hero Catherine anticipated; in fact, Ilana is a selfish drunk, which is exhaustingly familiar to Catherine.

When Doug suddenly dies of a heart attack, Catherine is completely devastated. She decides to go back home and do the only thing she's ever been good at: taking care of Tammy. But Tammy has come to terms with her mortality and wants to do right by her daughter.

And then it's the 29th.

## **WRITER'S STATEMENT**

At its core, this is a story about an enabling mother daughter relationship. It's a comedy about cancer. And suicide. And about how poverty disproportionately affects women. It's not a traditional knee slapper.

I was raised by a single mother on government assistance and it's rare to see that represented in comedy. Most of the depictions I've seen of poverty are deeply tragic, or verge on melodrama. That couldn't be further from my own experience. The women I know are completely hilarious. They have to be. Gallows humour is tantamount to survival.

That being said, this film doesn't shy away from tragedy. It can't. These character's lives are traumatic. But it's an opportunity to follow these women as they laugh and fight and find their strength in a world that doesn't care about them. I remember the moment when I realized that "having it all" is a luxury reserved for women who can already afford it. That there is no success without sacrifice.

That's what the women in this film must come to terms with. Do you stay within your given circumstances and sacrifice yourself? Or do you leave? And when you leave, who do you leave behind?

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

*Tammy's Always Dying* resonates with me on a core level. In Catherine's journey to come to terms with her dysfunctional family life, I see reflections of my sometimes-tumultuous journey with my own family.

I may not have a Tammy in my life, but my mother's struggle with and eventual passing due to cancer and my father's consequential struggles with alcoholism and isolation are what helped me relate to the themes of Joanne Sarazen's deftly-crafted screenplay.

While the story is rife with intensely honest heart-breaking elements and subject matter, I immediately took to the levity that the script uses as a lifejacket to keep it from sinking into dark a territory. I wanted to make this film because I know that there is a power to stepping back and looking at life from a fresh perspective, to not taking oneself too seriously, and to finding the amusing in the absurd.

Despite what Tammy says in the film, she and Catherine are very much NOT "nothing people," and it was a thrill to bring to life an authentically raw story of two captivating women.

## **KEY CAST BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Felicity Huffman (“Tammy MacDonald”)**



Felicity Kendall Huffman is an American film, stage, and television actress. She starred as Dana Whitaker in the ABC comedy-drama *Sports Night* from 1998 to 2000, which earned her a Golden Globe Award nomination. She is well known for her role as Lynette Scavo in the ABC comedy-drama *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), for which she earned the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series for the debut season of the series, and three Screen Actors Guild Awards and three consecutive Golden Globe nominations. Huffman drew critical praise for her performance as

a transgender woman in the independent film *Transamerica* (2005). The role earned her a Golden Globe Award, Independent Spirit Award, National Board of Review, and an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress. From 2015 to 2017, she starred in a third ABC series, the anthology crime drama *American Crime*, for which she received critical acclaim including three Primetime Emmy Award nominations, two Golden Globe nominations and a Screen Actors Guild nomination.

“Tammy” Character Description: Tammy is a hard-partying victim of fast-as-fuck K-Mart fashion who smokes a lot of weed and drinks a lot of rye despite being desperately poor. She is charismatic, hysterically funny, deeply sad and unintentionally wise. Tammy's a terrible mother even when she does her best.

## **Anastasia Phillips (“Catherine MacDonald”)**



After winning multiple awards for comedy and drama stage performances across Canada, Anastasia Phillips moved into film and television when she was cast as a lead in the comedy series MVP. A number of television and feature film projects followed, including: the movie NONSENSE REVOLUTION, produced by Thom Fitzgerald; her Gemini-nominated performance in MURDOCH MYSTERIES; and comedy BLUE MOUNTAIN STATE. She later joined the cast of the dramedy SKINS for MTV, and voiced the character of ‘Lo’ on the animated series STOKED. Phillips had a lead role in the Stephen Spielberg-produced ABC series LUCKY 7; in addition to a lead role on BOMB GIRLS, both the TV movie and the series, in which she starred alongside Meg Tilly. Also the voice of IKEA, Phillips was recently seen at TIFF17 in the independent comedy feature DON’T TALK TO IRENE with Geena Davis. This past TV season, Phillips was seen guest starring on ABC’s fan-favourite GREY’S ANATOMY, and in a heavily recurring role on The CW’s final season of REIGN. She was recently seen in the comedy ANGRY ANGEL, for Freeform. On the big screen this year, Phillips starred in the dramatic feature INCIDENT IN A GHOST LAND. She just wrapped guest star roles on CBC’s FRANKIE DRAKE and REX, and a recurring role on KILLJOYS for Syfy. Currently, Phillips is shooting the lead role in the film TAMMY’S ALWAYS DYING, alongside Felicity Huffman.

“Catherine” Character Description: Catherine carries an immense burden on her shoulders and is addicted to disappointment and cigarettes...but mostly disappointment. She's perpetually tired and deeply self-loathing. Basically, she's no fun and it's everyone else's fault. Deep inside there is a burning ambition but she's secretly terrified that the only thing she's good at is taking care of her mother, Tammy.

## Clark Johnson (“Doug”)



Clark Johnson is an accomplished actor and director whose work includes a wide range of both comedy and drama. Last year he sang and danced on Broadway in the musical GOD BLESS YOU MR. ROSEWATER with James Earl Jones. On television he has played such notable characters as Senator Robert Bettencourt on the Amazon series ALPHA HOUSE with John Goodman, Gus Haynes the edgy news editor on THE WIRE for HBO, and detective Meldrick Lewis on NBC’s long-running series HOMICIDE: LIFE ON THE STREET. For his performances in the films NURSE, FIGHTER.BOY and RUDE, Clark received two Genie Award nominations. He was most recently seen in MAGNUM OPUS, BRAWL IN CELL BLOCK 99 and

HYENA ROAD, which premiered at the Toronto film festival in 2015.

Clark’s many credits as a director include the just completed films JUANITA starring Alfre Woodard and PERCY, starring Christopher Walken, S.W.A.T. starring Samuel L. Jackson and Colin Farrell and THE SENTINEL starring Michael Douglas and Kiefer Sutherland. His most notable work as a television director, which is extensive, includes THE WIRE, HOMELAND, LAW & ORDER, THE GET DOWN, LUKE CAGE, THE GOOD FIGHT, ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK, THE WALKING DEAD, and THE SHIELD. He received an Emmy nomination for directing the pilot episode of the latter.

“Doug” Character Description: Something old fashioned about him that brings a sense of dignity to his dive bar. Doug is a semi-closeted friend of the family who has the unfortunate habit of always taking Tammy's side. Doug is also the owner of the local dingy bar where Catherine works and is the only real cheerleader she has in her life.

## **Lauren Holly (“Ilana Wiseman”)**



Lauren Holly is one of Hollywood’s most well respected actors and has proven to have lasting star power with roles in some of film and television’s most noteworthy projects. Holly has just recently been added to the cast of Netflix’s *DESIGNATED SURVIVOR* where she’ll play Lynn Harper, the daughter of a renowned Virginia senator, who is married to Mars Harper (Anthony Edwards), the new Chief of Staff. Lynn, who was prescribed opiates after a back injury, struggles with addiction.

Holly’s recent work includes the USA’s hit crime drama series, *MOTIVE*, as Dr. Betty Rogers; Director Jenny Shepard in the drama series *NCIS*; FOX’s hit drama, *LUCIFER*; and David E. Kelley’s Emmy Award-nominated drama, *CHICAGO HOPE*, marking her second project with Kelley, following their successful collaboration on the critically acclaimed, Emmy Award-winning series, *PICKET FENCES*.

“Ilana” Character Description: Ilana is a ball busting reality TV agent, vicodin and vodka personified. She is a ball-busting, A-type who is the epitome of success. Glamorous and shrewd, she must cope with what happens when you capitalize on someone’s personal tragedy. Ilana talks Catherine into capitalizing on her hard-luck story and doesn’t mind coaching Catherine into exaggerating events to draw in the audience.

## **CREW BIOGRAPHIES:**

### **Daniel Grant (Cinematographer):**



Raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia, award-winning cinematographer Daniel Grant has a wide variety of credits as a cinematographer on both documentary and fiction projects, including several feature films with some of Canada's most celebrated directors, including Bruce McDonald's *The Husband*, and Patricia Rozema's *Into The Forest*, starring Ellen Page and Even Rachel Wood. His work also includes the the Netflix Original film *ARQ*, and several award winning documentary features. The Canadian Society of Cinematographers has recognized him with nine nominations and three awards for his work to date, and he has also been nominated for Canadian

Screen Awards for best Documentary Cinematography for *The Messenger*, and best Narrative Feature Cinematography for *Octavio Is Dead*.

### **Bryan Atkinson (Editor):**



Bryan Atkinson has been a passionate student of film since the age of 14, and an award-winning editor of motion pictures for the last fifteen years. His experience editing dramatic feature films, shorts, documentary television, and animation has seen Bryan working with the brightest new talent in Toronto. His collaboration on Molly McGlynn's *MARY GOES ROUND* premiered at TIFF'17 to enthusiastic critical response. Previously, Stephen Dunn's feature debut, *CLOSET MONSTER*, won Best Canadian Feature Film at TIFF'15.

Bryan edited the hit feature film *GUIDANCE*, directed by Pat Mills, and had four shorts play at Sundance '15, with Dunn's *POP-UP PORNO* series as well as the acclaimed short film *HOLE*. After winning a Jury Prize with its debut at Locarno in 2014, *HOLE* has gone on to play 85 international festivals and win a Canadian Screen Award and the Grand Prize at Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival. Bryan's collaboration with Jonathan Williams and FirstLove Films on the CBC digital series *RIFTWORLD* took home the award for Best Drama Pilot at the New York Television Festival and earned him a DGC nomination for best editing.

### **Casey MQ (Composer):**



Casey MQ is a Canadian composer, songwriter, musician and record producer from Toronto.

Casey's music blurs between ambient productions and melancholic soul, distorted club music and electronic pop. At 17, Casey created the band 'Unbuttoned' and they have recorded two EPs and LPs respectively. During that time he began producing for other Canadian artists including Zaki Ibrahim, TiKA, and Cadence Weapon.

In 2016, Casey was accepted into the Red Bull Music Academy which encouraged him to focus on his solo artistry.

Growing up as a classically-trained pianist has had a clear influence on his style and approach. With time spent as a composer-in-residence at the Canadian Film Centre, Casey has subsequently gone on to compose original music for a number of films that have screened at TIFF, SXSW, & Hot Docs Film Festival including *Firecrackers*, *Mary Goes Round* and *Tito*. In December 2017, Casey MQ released a collaborative EP with Paris-based artist 'oklou' entitled 'For The Beasts'. The EP is a reimagining of pop-star vocal samples in a mutated form. It is a celebration of darkness and light.

### **Marian Wihak (Production Designer):**



Marian Wihak is an award-winning multi-disciplinary designer-artist working in film, television, theatre and visual art. She has won 4 awards for Best Production Design (1 Bijoux, 2 Geminis, and the Gold Medal for Best Production Design at the New York International Television Festival), and has been nominated numerous times for both Gemini and Directors Guild of Canada Best Production Design awards.

Recent features include *The Marijuana Chronicles* — set in 1972 Toronto; *STAND!* — a musical set in 1919 Winnipeg; *Tammy's Always Dying* — a gritty contemporary black comedy/drama; and *Love Jacked* — a romantic comedy shot in Toronto and Cape Town. She has frequently collaborated with Director Larry Weinstein on unique music-centric projects including *Dreaming of a Jewish Christmas* (International Emmy Nomination), *Mulroney: The Opera*, *Burnt Toast*, and *September Songs: The Music of Kurt Weil* — co-designed with opera designer Michael Levine (Gemini Award for Best Production Design). Another favourite project is *Dido and Aeneas*, with Director Barbara Willis-Sweete and the brilliant Mark Morris Dance Company.

## **KEY CREATIVE BIOGRAPHIES:**



### **Amy Jo Johnson (Director)**

A multifaceted talent in the industry, Amy Jo Johnson is a director, writer, producer, and actress. She recently directed her second feature film, *TAMMY'S ALWAYS DYING*, starring Felicity Huffman and Anastasia Phillips which will world premiere at TIFF 2019. In 2016, Amy Jo wrote, produced, and directed her first feature film, *THE SPACE BETWEEN*. Financed in part through a successful crowdfunding campaign, *THE SPACE BETWEEN* had its world premiere at the Shanghai International Film Festival. Following the film's grassroots theatrical release, Amy Jo (now a proud Canadian citizen) graduated from the Canadian Film Centre's director's program. Before turning her attention toward directing, the Cape Cod native worked for over 20 years as an accomplished actor, starring in popular television shows such as "Felicity," "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers," and "Flashpoint."

### **Joanne Sarazen (Writer)**



Joanne Sarazen is a screenwriter, playwright and alumna of the 2017 Canadian Film Centre's Writers' Lab. Her first feature length screenplay, *Tammy's Always Dying*, went to camera in November 2018 and is premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2019. She is the recipient of the 2019 Micki Moore Residency at TIFF to work on her second feature. As a playwright, Joanne's work has been produced in Montreal, Toronto and Banff. She is also a very accomplished waitress.

### **Jessica Adams (Producer)**



Jessica Adams is a Canadian and British Producer and graduate of Norman Jewison's Producers Lab at the Canadian Film Centre. The features and short films she has produced have screened in numerous festivals across the world including, TIFF, Tribeca, Shanghai International Film Festival, and Edinburgh International Film Festival. Jessica's credits include Amy Jo Johnson's *THE SPACE BETWEEN*, *ASTRONAUT* starring Oscar Winner Richard Dreyfuss, Oscar Nominee Graham Greene, and *TAMMY'S ALWAYS DYING*, Jessica's second collaboration with Amy Jo Johnson which stars Oscar Nominee Felicity Huffman, Clark Johnson and Lauren Holly.

## **JA Productions (Production Company)**

JA Productions is a Toronto-based production company helmed by British-Canadian producer Jessica Adams. JA Productions has a mandate to find stories that challenge and inspire audiences. We produce through a relationship-first based approach and we are proud of the long-term partnerships we have fostered with creatives over the years. Recent credits include Amy Jo Johnson's THE SPACE BETWEEN, ASTRONAUT starring Oscar Winner Richard Dreyfuss, Oscar Nominee Graham Greene, and TAMMY'S ALWAYS DYING, Jessica's second collaboration with Amy Jo Johnson which stars Felicity Huffman, Clark Johnson and Lauren Holly. JA Productions is currently in prep on THE VEGAS Canadian / Argentinian political-dance drama by Alison Murray and is developing Shelagh McLeod's sci-fi drama NEXUS as well as Sundance winning director, Luis De Filippis debut feature SOMETHING YOU SAID LAST NIGHT in partnership with Elevation Pictures, Crave, and Freestyle Pictures.

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### **BILLING BLOCK (temp):**

JA PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS ANAMY JO JOHNSON FILM PRODUCED WITH THE PARTICIPATION OFTELEFILM CANADA COMMISSIONED BY CBC FILMS PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITHTHE MOVIE NETWORKA DIVISION OF BELL MEDIA INC "TAMMY'S ALWAYS DYING" FELICITY HUFFMAN ANASTASIA PHILLIPS LAUREN HOLLY WITHCLARK JOHNSON COSTUME DESIGNER CRYSTAL SILDEN PRODUCTION DESIGNERMARIAN WIHAK EDITORBRYAN ATKINSON DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHYDANIEL GRANT EXECUTIVE PRODUCERTAJJ FILMS PRODUCED WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF ONTARIO CREATES