



NEW RELEASES

# Swan Song

Writers, artists, and filmmakers have long considered the massive implications of being able to replace human life with a facsimile but while others have gone down dark alleys, Benjamin Cleary saw it from a more upbeat perspective, wondering how such a technology might allow a couple on the verge of tragedy to instead grow and transform. Would a man, given the incredible chance, choose to keep his loved ones happy and free from loss – even at the cost of concealing the most monumental of secrets?

The Dublin-based filmmaker is best known for his Academy Award-winning short *Stutterer*, about a lonely typographer connecting with his new girlfriend despite a severe speech impediment. Though not a stutterer himself, he based that lead character on a close friend. With *Swan Song*, he also drew on lived experiences. Early in his life, a series of deaths of young friends, as well as that of his best friend's mother when they were still teenagers, devastated Cleary. He saw first-hand how intense grief could short-circuit youthful dreams.

'At that young age, you really see the ripple effect that death has on everyone around the person. The people who are left behind suffer so much. Those wounds can take an awfully long time to heal, if they ever do,' reflects Cleary.

These events led Cleary to ponder what might happen if you could give your closest loved ones the gift of obliterating loss. What if you could cheat death, at least partly, by navigating a covert way around it? Having seen friends boldly search for any possible extension of life, no matter the risks, he felt certain there would be those who would venture into the unknown.

'Someone very close to my family was diagnosed with a brain tumour a number of years ago and hearing them say to their specialist that they would try anything, no matter how experimental, if it had even the slightest chance of working, really stuck with me. That was one of the things that sparked the ideas that led to *Swan Song*,' Cleary explains.

Cleary wasn't so much interested in the scientific elements of replication. Rather, he was fascinated by the vast moral, spiritual and psychological dilemmas such a technology would pose if put into action. As he began writing *Swan Song*, he had Cameron grapple with many of them – not in the abstract, but within the confines of a very real and relatable family life with the usual flaws and miscommunications, but also moments of deep wonder and joy.

As Cameron grows ever closer to giving his life over to a replica of himself, he is overcome with doubts. Is this a betrayal – or is it heroically selfless – to keep his death under wraps? Is he harming Poppy by not sharing his last moments with her? Or is he giving her, their son, and their child to come the chance to thrive in a strong, renewed marriage? What about the replicant that the laboratory temporarily names Jack? How can Cameron relate to Jack –

who is Cameron genetically but also isn't quite fully Cameron – and help him to be the husband he most wants to be? And what can Cameron learn by watching his double step into his everyday life?

These questions kept spurring even bigger questions as Cleary wrote. Yet the more complex things got, the more Cleary homed in on the delicate tale of love at the core. He maintained a taut simplicity with the storytelling, a minimalism that not only laid bare the connection between Cameron and Poppy but also ultimately informed the film's entire visual design.

Once the screenplay for *Swan Song* started circulating, the mix of rich ideas and emotional weight quickly attracted attention. Producers Adam Shulman and Jacob Perlin of Anonymous Content both reacted in their own very personal ways to Cameron's dilemma.

'I vividly remember when Ben pitched us,' recalls Shulman. 'Because at the time a relative of mine had terminal cancer and my children were in the throes of growing up, so I completely latched onto the ideas in the story. We then had enormous fun working with Ben to hone this complex narrative. As the story involves Cameron downloading all of his memories, it was like a Rubik's Cube of figuring out all the myriad possibilities of which memories to include, and when in the timeline they should appear. We had many engrossing discussions about Cameron's struggle with whether to move ahead.'

'What was so rare and attractive is that this is a love story that poses big moral questions,' adds Perlin. 'The backdrop is sci-fi, but inside that is the tale of a man who wants to leave a better version of himself behind for his wife. It's so thought-provoking. I can't wait for audiences to see and talk about this film.'

Shulman and Perlin were eventually joined by veteran producer Jonathan King, who recently started Concordia Studio, and Rebecca Bourke, who had produced all of Cleary's short films in Ireland. King says, 'After seeing Ben's shorts, I knew he had the ability to deliver gut-punch emotions. He's very skilled at capturing the interior of his characters – their fears, longings and desires – which is the heart of *Swan Song*.'

Bourke anticipates audiences talking about Cameron's choices long after the credits roll. 'I expect *Swan Song* will ignite conversations about love, life, relationships and the tough decisions we are sometimes forced to make,' she says. 'It's exciting to have a love story that also provokes complex existential questions like what is a soul, what is consciousness, what makes you who you are?'

Development of *Swan Song* took a transformational turn when Cleary heard Mahershala Ali was interested in the project. Ali was so taken with the story he wanted a creative hand in the filmmaking to ensure the story of this family was told authentically. He came aboard not only in the lead role but as a hands-on producer, bringing along Mimi Valdés – his partner in the new production company Know Wonder – who is known for championing inclusivity across all forms of pop culture.

'As someone who has experienced the loss of so many loved ones, I was intrigued by the idea of preventing your family and friends from grieving,'

Valdés shares. ‘Also, I couldn’t believe the role was being offered to Mahershala! Black people are rarely seen in these kinds of movies, and this felt like an opportunity to tell a story about a Black family we rarely get to tell – one of simple humanity. Hollywood prefers to focus on racism, police brutality, trauma, etcetera when it comes to Black stories instead of us just living life, existing like regular human beings. We’re also beyond proud that this unique story about a Black family will be Know Wonder’s first narrative feature. The opportunity to produce a film like this is not only gratifying, but it’s also validation that Black stories are global stories with universal themes.’

Ali and Valdés made a significant mark on the screenplay and design, committing themselves to ensuring that every aspect of the story was true to the Turners as a Black family. ‘We felt the weight of responsibility to get this right,’ notes Valdés. ‘Black people just don’t exist in this genre. So, it was crucial that everything about the family felt authentic, from the art on the walls to Poppy’s hair. We also wanted to make sure there was a sense of optimism, a sense that the near future will indeed continue to improve for our community.’

As for Cleary, he fed off the input. ‘Ben was completely open to all of our suggestions,’ recalls Valdés. ‘He’s a true collaborator and given that this is such a personal story for him, his willingness to make changes was especially admirable. Ben is an empathetic soul and seeing him tap into this superpower as a filmmaker is beautiful.’

That empathy, Valdés notes, is also what allows the film to transcend its futuristic setting by addressing why the future matters to us in the first place – because of those who inhabit it. ‘People will certainly talk about Cameron’s decision, whether they agree with it or not, and what they would do in his situation. But I also hope people find joy in watching the love within this family, and that it inspires audiences to cherish their loved ones while they’re still here,’ she says. ‘Tomorrow is not promised, and we need to enjoy each other while we can.’

#### **Production notes**

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## SWAN SONG

*Directed by:* Benjamin Cleary  
©: Swan Song Productions LLC  
*a Know Wonder and Anonymous Content production*  
*a By Ghost production*  
*in participation with:* Concordia Studio  
*Presented by:* Apple Original Films  
*Produced with the support of incentives for the Irish Film Industry provided by the:* Government of Ireland  
*With the participation of the:* Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit Program, Province of British Columbia Production Services Tax Credit  
*Tax incentive consulting services:* Entertainment Partners Canada  
*Irish Production Services provided by:* Assembly Studios  
*Executive Producer:* Shea Kammer  
*Produced by:* Mahershala Ali, Rebecca Bourke, Jonathan King, Jacob Perlin, Adam Shulman, Mimi Valdés  
*Unit Production Manager:* Shea Kammer  
*Production Manager:* Drew Locke  
*Financial Controller:* Karen Bergen  
*Unit Manager:* Kate Vanderbyl Keates  
*Location Manager:* Terry McKay  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Lori Waters  
*1st Assistant Director:* Thomas Patrick Smith  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Chad Belair  
*Script Supervisor:* Jessica Clothier  
*Casting by:* Victoria Thomas  
*Written by:* Benjamin Cleary  
*Director of Photography:* Masanobu Takayanagi  
*2nd Unit Directors of Photography/Operators:* Peter Wilke, Joel Ransom  
*A Camera Operator:* Masanobu Takayanagi  
*B Camera Operator:* Peter Wilke  
*Steadicam Operator:* Peter Wilke  
*Digital Imaging Technician:* Leon Rivers-Moore  
*Still Photographer:* Kimberley French  
*VFX Producing Supervisor:* Ajoy Mani  
*Visual Effects:* Image Engine, Screen Scene, Company 3, Territory, Basilic Fly, Pentagram  
*Special Effects Co-ordinator:* Tony Lazarowich  
*Edited by:* Nathan Nugent  
*Production Designer:* Annie Beauchamp  
*Supervising Art Director:* Michael Diner  
*Art Director:* Callum Webster  
*Set Decorator:* Shannon Gottlieb  
*Graphic Designer:* Patrick Zahorodniuk

*Concept Artist:* Liam Beck  
*Illustrator:* Tony Drew  
*Storyboard Artist/Concept Designer:* Sam Hudecki  
*Property Buyers:* Clayton Flagg, Nancy Pownall  
*Costume Designer:* Cynthia Ann Summers  
*Make-up Department Head:* Debi Young  
*Make-up Department Head (Canada):* Zabrina Matiru  
*Hair Department Head:* Melissa Forney  
*Title Design by:* Andrew Lim  
*Colourist:* Tom Poole  
*Music by:* Jay Wadley  
*Orchestra:* Budapest Scoring  
*Music Supervisor:* Meghan Currier  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Chris Duesterdiek  
*Re-recording Mixer:* Bernard Gariepy Strobl  
*Supervising Sound Editors:* David McCallum, Steve Fanagan  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Gaston Morrison  
*Unit Publicist:* Allison Barber  
*Digital Intermediate Provided by:* Company 3

## Cast

Mahershala Ali (*Cameron Turner/Jack*)  
Naomie Harris (*Poppy Turner*)  
Awkwafina (*Kate/Kate duplicate*)  
Adam Beach (*Dalton*)  
Nyasha Hatendi (*Andre*)  
Glenn Close (*Dr Jo Scott*)  
Lee Shorten (*Rafa*)  
Dax Rey (*Cory, age 8*)  
Aiden Adejuwon (*Cory, age 5*)  
Ace Lever (*Cory, age 2*)  
Cayden Shena (*Cameron, age 5*)  
Jayr Tinaco (*Alex*)  
Jessica Hayles (*Julie*)  
Mikayla Lagman (*Sammy*)  
Celia Aloma (*Cameron's mum*)  
Luke Camilleri (*Rob*)  
Christi La Liberté (*elderly woman on train*)  
Lexi (*Ellington*)

USA 2021©  
112 mins

Courtesy of Apple Original Films

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