



MORE THAN A RISING STAR

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

SHAYNE LAVERDIÈRE
TAKES IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

In the past year, Shayne Laverdière has shot celebrities of international calibre including Adele, Tilda Swinton, Dakota Johnson, and fellow Quebec artists filmmaker Xavier Dolan and sculptor Armand Vaillancourt. The photographer, born and raised in Quebec City, has been hailed as a rising star. But the often-used term can be both trite and misleading. It suggests hype—a point in time where artists suddenly become so popular that everyone wants to work with them—but it says little about the journey that got them there or the endless effort required to continue producing remarkable pieces. Aware of this, Shayne Laverdière is far from resting on his laurels. In fact, he's working harder than ever.

You do photo shoots in New York, you attend the Cannes Film Festival, and your work has appeared in *Vanity Fair* and *L'Uomo Vogue*. How does it feel?

I know that I'm in a privileged position, and I'm thankful for it. I'm so grateful for the opportunities I've been given and the risks I've taken. In 2011, the then-budding actor Niels Schneider—who appeared in *I Killed My Mother*, the film that introduced Xavier Dolan to the world—asked me to join him at the Cannes Festival. He couldn't buy my ticket, but he promised me that he'd give me access. That year, he went on to win the Male Revelation award, and I got to photograph Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones. I was in a waiting room when I heard a magazine [*Gala*] editor say that they didn't have anyone to do the shoot. I immediately volunteered and showed him my book. He liked what he saw and offered me the job.

Given the international attention you're now being given, how do you reconcile living in Montreal and working abroad?

I still make a good portion of my income from contracts at home. At the same time, I've always travelled quite a fair bit for work. For me, it's never been about moving to one city and building a reputation strictly there. I believe it's better to diversify. And Montreal is a dangerous city, in the sense of the comfort it affords. There's a good lifestyle here. I have a motorcycle, a nice big apartment, health insurance,





CANON EOS 5D, 43 MM, F/3.5, 1/80 S, ISO 320. © SHAYNE LAVERDIÈRE

and great clients who bring me fun commercial work. When I'm working on editorial projects, I don't have to spend nearly as much as I would in one of the major photo capitals of the world. The only thing that's missing are really good models, which explains why I've been focusing on portraiture rather than fashion.

How did that shift affect your practice?

I used to think that I needed to have a portfolio that showed my abilities to shoot a product on a white background, or on a black one. Once I decided to no longer try to impress clients by proving to them that I could do the basics

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and instead focused on what I do best, that is, cinematic portraits, I started getting the work that I was striving for: photographing A-list actors and top models for brands. Clients now ask for me because they believe my style fits their brand. I've even managed to convince some to let me use film.

What are the differences between the Canadian editorial and commercial photography markets, and the ones in the United States or Europe?

Outside of the country, I'm working for major clients who have access to all the

photographers in the world and could hire anyone they'd like, so when they're booking you, they're booking your style. Therefore, they give you a lot of freedom. During my first shoot for Marc O'Polo, the creative director stayed with me for the first shot, looked at it and said, "Okay, you get it. I'll go write my emails now." And he did. He left me alone to do what I do best: produce great photos. That's the dream of all photographers: we perform best when it's just the set and us. However, in Canada, perhaps because it's a smaller market, there's constant micromanagement, which can be difficult to navigate. Still, I



PHOTOS OF ARMAND VAILLANCOURT FOR DRESS TO KILL MAGAZINE © SHAYNE LAVERDIÈRE

consider it a fun challenge: how to find my happy zone and do the best that I can within the guidelines that I'm given.

Would you say that's the hardest part of working in Canada, having to contend with several opinions at once?

No, like I said, I take it as a challenge. The hardest part of working in Canada is managing my time in a way that allows me to travel. The more success you have at home, the more difficult it is to find the time to go shoot elsewhere. 2016 has been a pivotal year for me. I've had a

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lot of opportunities that have enabled me to take my work to the next level. Now I wish I could split myself in two, maybe three, so I could be in Canada, Europe and New York at once.

You've worked a lot with Xavier Dolan, as his set photographer and shooting his portrait for several magazines. What role does he play in your career?

Xavier Dolan is my muse. He's an amazing artist with an incredible vision. He has been very influential for me, and I think for others too. He pushes

me really far, in directions that I would have never dared to go. Every photographer ought to have a muse. For most, it's a beautiful model; for me, much to my surprise, it happens to be a talented young filmmaker. This said, whenever I don't have a job with Xavier Dolan, I make sure to give it my all. When I got the Grand Prix of the Concours Lux last year for my series with Luca Guadagnino and Tilda Swinton, which appeared in *L'Uomo Vogue*, I saw it as a bit of a consecration, the proof that I could do strong work with other important celebrities.

We've been talking a lot about where you are now, but I'd like to know more about how you got here. What were some of the milestones?

When I was ten years old, I found a camera in a family member's drawer that intrigued me. I guess someone saw me because, lo and behold, at my next birthday, that's what I got. And I swear, this is not a joke, I had it in my hand and as a child thought, "This is what I'm going to do with my life." The camera spoke to me. I started taking pictures of everything: my remote-control cars, waterfalls, flowers. In 6th grade, I gave myself my first assignment: make a portrait of everyone in my class. In high school, my math teacher, who was an avid amateur photographer, recognized my passion and taught me how to use the darkroom. I even got the keys to it, so I could come in after hours. At fifteen, my mom took me on a trip to Toronto. By the time the visit ended, I knew I had to move to the city to pursue my trade. So I finished Grade 9 and found a school in Toronto that had a specialization in photography. I moved there by myself at 16! It's the only time in my life where I lost sight of my goal, my focus. A lot of people were taking the course for fun and would fool with my enlarger settings in the darkroom. So, I went back to Quebec City and enrolled in business administration in CEGEP. That lasted six months. Only detour I took. After that, I moved to Montreal, studied cinema and communication at Dawson College, graduated, was rejected from the Concordia photo program, [and] did a few weeks at Collège Marsan before I decided I was done with school and started assisting.



CANON EOS 5D MARK III, 35 MM, F/1.4, 1/1300 S, ISO 160. © SHAYNE LAVERDIÈRE

And how did you get your foot in the door? How did you convince other photographers to hire you?

At the time, I got a cell phone plan, and the first three months were free. So I gave myself three months to find work. I called

everyone in Montreal repeatedly to offer my services. Martin Tremblay of lepinch.com gave me a shot, and then it exploded. I had a good attitude and could make a damn good latte. I became the second assistant to everybody. In hindsight that was a good thing. Because I never became a full-time employee, I had to stay on my toes. At the same time, I started taking on a few clients of my own. 2010 was the last year I assisted. I got this opportunity to lead a one-day shoot but couldn't do it because I already had an assistant gig that would take eight days. I would have made roughly the same amount of money. The math was clear.

What did you learn about yourself during those formative years?

One of the aspects I really love is the hunt. Photography is a lot akin to flirting. It's so exciting to meet somebody for the first time, to get to know him or her, to build trust and to create something beautiful as a result. It's kind of like speed dating. I have to make the person that I'm working with feel as safe and as comfortable as possible, quickly. There's no recipe for that because individuals have their own personality, baggage and peculiarities. You have to figure those out rapidly and cater to them.

How do you go about deciphering what makes a person comfortable and unique?

I always try to speak to those I will be photographing ahead of time, or if it's a busy celebrity, to his or her PR team. I explain my process. I emphasize how

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seriously I take it, that I want to create a lasting photograph with them, one that won't be lost in the sea of images being produced.

Speaking of which, how do you ensure that your photographs stand out?

I avoid following the trends. And if that is required of me by the clients, I find a way to subvert it to stay true to my style. In some ways, I'm an aesthetically conservative photographer. My inspirations are the penultimate classic photographers: Henri

Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau, Norman Parkinson. I try to avoid the multitude of photo blogs and Tumblr where the young look at each other and take their cues from their peers. That creates homogeneity. I prefer to go to a library and look at the Renaissance paintings in a book. I try to do my own thing, and whenever I feel like I'm not, I give myself a challenge, like combining props and locations that would not go together. I recently did a shoot where I brought twenty pinball machines into an ancient French chapel... ■

