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William Christopher Ellis is Dead

Jordan Tannahill and William Christopher Ellis

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At the end of *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy Gale tells us, “if you can’t find your heart’s desire in your own backyard, then you never really lost it to begin with.” At the end of *William Christopher Ellis is Dead*, a short film by Jordan Tannahill starring the titular William Christopher Ellis, Ellis—a ghost (maybe)—discovers his body in his own backyard, never lost to begin with. But the same time as his voice over seems to indicate that his death may have been imaginary or metaphorical, the accompanying visual of Ellis vanishing while jumping mid-air strongly implies a soul’s ascension to another plane of existence. It’s a perplexing final image for a film with a title that sounds like it could be a documentary, but a plotline that is decidedly over the rainbow.

Let’s start with that title. The first half—the full name of the performer—implies truth. The second we know is lie. William Christopher Ellis is not dead. If you come see the film on opening night, you’ll spot him sitting in the lobby in his underwear. “Don’t all of our names sound ostentatious when they’re written out in full?” asks Tannahill. “The video is about my relationship with Will’s past, before I met him. I attempt to envision an origin story for him based largely on my own whimsy and desires. His full name and his presence onscreen are really the only things I have to graft my fantasy onto.”

A little context: Ellis and Tannahill are both artistic and romantic partners. Ellis starred in Tannahill’s play *Feral Child* (another project that required him to spend a lot of time in his underwear in public) and in 2012, they opened Videofag together: a Kensington Market Asian barbershop turned art/performance space where the couple also live. It’s also worth noting that Ellis really is an actor who moved from PEI to Toronto and that he really was involved in a dinner theatre troupe in Miramichi – two points of truth that show up in Tannahill’s imagining of Ellis’ past. And, of course, the other two characters that appear onscreen (both played by Ellis) are also real life figures: Patty Hearst and Robert Dayton. “There were a few historical figures, like heiress Patty Hearst, political hostage Ingrid Betancourt, British mercenary Simon Mann, and Irish patriot Roger Casement whose biographies I wanted to weave together with Will’s,” Tannahill explains. “I wanted to place him alongside a pantheon of bizarre, demi-celebrities. And I wanted Will to play each of these characters in a bad drag/dress-up sort of way, to represent the idea that they are all, somehow, really versions of him.”

Not all of the planned demi-celebs made the final cut, but it’s interesting to note which ones did. As a countercultural figure, Patty Hearst straddles high camp and real-life

trauma. The film explicitly references her time as prisoner-cum-devotée of the Symbionese Liberation Army, but also implicitly connects itself to John Waters' gonzo cinematic oeuvre, where Hearst often pops up in a cameo. If the choice to include her in the story seems very intentional, the inclusion of Robert Dayton (the multidisciplinary Toronto-based artist best known for his alter ego The Canadian Romantic) was a complete accident. "Our version of Simon Mann looked so much like Robert Dayton, a bizarre demi-celebrity in his own right," says Tannahill, "that I decided to replace Mann with Dayton."

That kind of editing-room improv is typical of Tannahill's work. Probably best known for the theatre work he has created for his company Suburban Beast, he refers to many of his plays as "live-films" due to their incorporation of both live performance and projected video sequences. *William Christopher Ellis is Dead* builds on the aesthetic Tannahill has established in Suburban Beast shows like *Post Eden*, *Insurgency*, *Concord Floral*, and *Bravislovia*, which also feature footage of young people wandering "urban exploration" style through abandoned buildings and deserted outdoor spaces. In all of these projects, the story is the result of the footage as much as the footage is the result of the story. "I shoot with only a skeletal plot in mind," says Tannahill. "With *William Christopher Ellis is Dead*, a lot of the content was informed by the locations we chose to shoot in. We selected mostly abandoned sites that we found somehow curious or unusual and built images around them." Since all of the film's dialogue is voice-over narration, the script can be written after the footage has been shot.

This may explain why the film is more coherent on a visual level than a narrative one. The more we hear about it, the less the story actually makes sense. How can Ellis wonder if he died as a child when he seems to have memories from much later? When he meets Robert Dayton and auditions for his movie, is he already dead? Has his mother hired Dayton to find him, or to kill him? Why does Dayton kill, of all people, Patty Hearst? And just exactly how dead is Ellis in the first place if he can still meet his mother for eggs? An attempt to understand the film as a conventional narrative is less satisfying than considering it as an experimental collage of ideas and allusions; a new take on the story of the aspiring actress who moves to the big city, turns to prostitution, and winds up dead; a queer *Black Dahlia* or *Mulholland Drive*. "I often find films like *Mulholland Drive* to be sort of queer allegories. It's in this narrative mould that I've chosen to explore the theme of 'queer past erasure,'" Tannahill explains. "Something I've been interested in is how many queers experience a sort of erasure of their past when they come out. Many wash themselves of their pre-gay past (of friends, personal tastes, ideologies) in order to fully embrace their newfound identity and perhaps to forget painful experiences. This is often tied to a movement from a small town/rural context to an urban one—something also associated with the young-starlet-moving-to-the-city-making-it-in-the-movies narrative trope."

Understood this way, Ellis' "death" can be read as a metaphor for coming out; his search for his body becomes the desire to reunite his current self with aspects of his past self that he has discarded out of necessity. In this context, the ending seems hopeful. By confronting his past, Ellis is able to escape it and embrace a "world full of possibilities."

-- Johnnie Walker