

'A DEEPLY TOUCHING EXPERIENCE.  
BRENDAN FRASER GIVES THE PERFORMANCE  
OF A LIFETIME.'

TIME OUT

  
tiff.


BRENDAN FRASER SADIE SINK

# THE WHALE


EEN FILM VAN

DARREN ARONOFSKY (BLACK SWAN)

A24 PRESENTS A PROTOZOA PRODUCTION A FILM BY DARREN ARONOFSKY "THE WHALE" BRENDAN FRASER  
SADIE SINK HONG CHAU TY SIMPKINS AND SAMANTHA MORTON CASTING BY MARY VERNIEU, CSA AND LINDSAY GRAHAM AHANONU, CSA  
MUSIC BY ROB SIMONSEN PRODUCTION DESIGNER ADRIEN MOROT COSTUME DESIGNER DANNY GLICKER EDITOR ANDREW WEISBLUM, ACE PRODUCTION DESIGNER MARK FRIEDBERG DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ROBERT PYZOGA  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS SCOTT FRANKLIN TYSON BIDNER PRODUCED BY JEREMY DAWSON ARI HANDEL DARREN ARONOFSKY  
WRITTEN BY SAMUEL D. HUNTER BASED ON THE PLAY BY SAMUEL D. HUNTER DIRECTED BY DARREN ARONOFSKY A24



[www.cineart.nl](http://www.cineart.nl)

 [cineartnederland](https://www.facebook.com/cineartnederland)

 [cineartnl](https://twitter.com/cineartnl)

 [cineartnl](https://www.youtube.com/cineartnl)

 [cineart\\_nl](https://www.instagram.com/cineart_nl)



VANAF 16 FEBRUARI IN DE BIOSCOOP

**PERSMAP**

# **THE WHALE**



*cinéart*



FIESTA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
A BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2022  
Official Selection



Drama - 2022 - VS - 117 minuten  
Bioscooprelease: 16 februari 2023

Meer over de film: [Cineart.nl/films/the-whale](https://www.cineart.nl/films/the-whale)

Persmaterialen: [Cineart.nl/pers/the-whale](https://www.cineart.nl/pers/the-whale)

**Distributie:**

Cinéart Nederland  
Herengracht 328-III  
1016 CE Amsterdam

**Contact:**

Julia van Berlo  
M: +31 6 83785238  
[julia@cineart.nl](mailto:julia@cineart.nl)

# SYNOPSIS

THE WHALE is een aangrijpend drama met een fenomenale comeback van acteur Branden Fraser (THE MUMMY TRILOGY, CRASH) als vader, die probeert opnieuw contact te maken met zijn vervreemde tienerdochter, gespeeld door rising star Sadie Sink (STRANGER THINGS). Oscargenomineerde regisseur Darren Aronofsky (BLACK SWAN, REQUIEM FOR A DREAM) schetst een ontroerend portret van een man die zijn leven opnieuw betekenis wil geven.

Charlie (Brendan Fraser) leeft teruggetrokken en geeft Engelse les online. Hij heeft ernstig overgewicht en lijkt alles in zijn leven te zijn kwijt geraakt. Toch probeert Charlie, vol hoop, het contact met zijn 17-jarige dochter Ellie (Sadie Sink) te herstellen. Maar die neemt het hem kwalijk dat hij zijn gezin in de steek heeft gelaten. Langzaamaan ontdekken we hoe Charlie de man geworden is die we zien, en hoe hij hoopt toch een vader voor Ellie te kunnen zijn.

THE WHALE is zowel hartverwarmend als hartverscheurend. Aronofsky maakt je onderdeel van een leven waar je van weg wilt kijken, maar dat je tot tranen toe beroert. 'Fraser gives the performance of a lifetime' (Time Out).



# PRODUCTION NOTES

In Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale*, Brendan Fraser gives a virtuosic performance as Charlie, an English teacher living with severe obesity whose time is running out. As he makes a last bold attempt to reconcile with his broken family, Charlie must confront, with his full heart and fierce wit, long-buried traumas and unspoken love that have haunted him for decades.

But *The Whale* offers much more than just darkness. It's a soaring character study of a man wrestling with the enormity of his regret, the duty of fatherhood, and the feasibility of goodness itself. At its core, *The Whale* is a story about transformation and transcendence, one man's odyssey into himself and out of his body, a journey through the depths of grief towards the possibility of salvation.

Through Charlie, the film gives us access to a life that is rarely portrayed with tenderness or intelligence on the big screen. Fraser pours himself into the kaleidoscope of Charlie's inner world, all of its contradictions and longings and fears, with a twinkling, almost-mischievous wit. It's a brilliant, deeply warm performance; one that crucially does not see empathy as the enemy of honesty, but rather as two sides of the same coin.

This intimacy between audience and protagonist is the beating heart of the film, which takes place over five days in Charlie's world as he seeks connection with various people in his life—an estranged daughter, an ex-wife, his best friend, his online students, and even the wide-eyed missionary at his front door. Through each of these encounters, a portrait of Charlie's life comes into focus, and the heartbreaking severity of his situation becomes clear. What began as a one-bedroom apartment becomes a battleground, where past, present, and uncertain future converge and combat.

Darren Aronofsky has wanted to adapt *The Whale* as a film ever since he first saw the play, written by Sam D. Hunter, nearly a decade ago. He was immediately struck by its intelligence, and the fearless way it interrogates the human condition without offering an easy answer.

Says Aronofsky, "What I love about *The Whale* is that it invites you to see the humanity of characters who are not all good or all bad, who truly live in grey tones the way people do, and who have extremely rich, intricate inner lives. They've all made mistakes, but what they share are immense hearts and the desire to love even when others are seemingly unlovable. It's a story that asks a simple but essential question: can we save each other? That feels important in the world right now, especially when people seem more than ever to be turning their backs on one another."

"For me, this is what cinema is all about," he continues. "Through the power of emotion, a story like this can put us into the shoes of a man we might otherwise never even wonder about, and remind us that all the promise of love and redemption is there in every human existence."

In some ways, *The Whale* is a hunt, a search to grasp the slippery nature of compassion—why we need it and why we push it away, when we can give it and when we can't. But the audience also experience the thrill of it blooming in the course of the story's construction. In the midst of re-examining trust and its boundaries, Charlie breaks down his own borderlines. He has been in a spiral ever since the death of his partner, but now, he has come through weariness to a palpable optimism that lights up these urgent days. At the story's climax, Charlie asks what Aronofsky sees as one of the story's most profound questions: "Do you ever get the feeling that people are incapable of not caring?"

All the hope Charlie has left, especially for his seemingly misanthropic daughter Ellie, is rooted in this most human of qualities. For if his convictions about empathy are true, anything is possible for Ellie. "Charlie is a very flawed person, but he understands the power of imagination. He believes that if you take the time, anyone might imagine, and maybe even understand, someone else's world," says Aronofsky.

## **STAGE TO SCREEN**

When the original stage version of *The Whale* premiered in 2012, there was some initial concern. Even on the compact landscape of a stage, would theater audiences show up to see a show where the protagonist is marooned on the couch the entire runtime? And what about that title?

As it turned out, all the worrying was for naught. Hunter's play was a hit. Instead of feeling overly confined, audiences praised it for its expansive, panoramic interrogation of the human spirit, for the authenticity and humor of its characters, and its profoundly moving meditation on grief, compulsion, and redemption.

Any concern about the possible insensitivity of the title was quickly dispelled as well, once it was understood that *Moby-Dick* factored prominently into the show, both literally and thematically. Charlie and Ahab were not so unlike, underneath it all; both men caught up in the pursuit of a dream, intoxicated with the could-have-been, obsessed with the fantasy of another future.

After it's successful and buzzy Denver debut, *The Whale* moved off-Broadway in January of 2012 via Playwrights Horizons, where it garnered a cavalcade of awards, including the Lucille Lortel Award for Best Play, the GLAAD Media Award, and a Special Drama Desk Award for Significant Contribution to Theatre. It also sealed Hunter's growing reputation as a major dramaturge of these times, attuned to the intricacies of modern identity and the big, classical questions of spirit and existence.

Aronofsky caught the play in that early run in New York, fresh off the back of his last film and thinking about his next project. He was already established as a singular cinematic voice whose work defied categorization. He began his career with the hallucinatory thriller *Pi*, before going on to adapt and direct the harrowing addiction fable *Requiem for a Dream*. The mind-melting sci-fi cult classic *The Fountain* was next, followed by two

back-to-back forays into the psychological sports thrillers of *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*. Though vastly different in subject matter and tone, Aronofsky's films (including the ones to come—biblical revisionist epic *Noah* and the searing eco-feminist parable *Mother!*) shared a common thread as explorations into subjectivity, and the breaking of barriers between self and story.

Aronofsky knew very little about *The Whale* going in; he had bought tickets on a whim, intrigued by the title. It was only after the lights came up, in the afterglow of Charlie's journey, that he knew he had to get the rights to the show.

"I connected with the themes and ideas, and the way it found beauty in things our prejudices too often make inhuman," Aronofsky says. "It made my heart ache, it made me laugh, and I felt inspired by the bravery and grace each character finds. It took on a question I like to explore in my own work: how do you transport audiences inside of characters they never could imagine being? I didn't know then if it could be a movie, but I met with Sam and connected with him immediately."

The instant bond between Aronofsky and Hunter set things into motion. Both agreed that Hunter should adapt his own work—the only problem was that Hunter had never written a screenplay. But encouraged by Aronofsky and his receipt of a MacArthur Genius grant, Hunter began to teach himself the form from scratch, studying cinematic language and working out how to transform his work from stage to screen. "Sam is so incredibly gifted, I knew he'd find his way," says Aronofsky.

As an avid lover of learning, Hunter savored the challenge. "It was a chance to look at the story again with fresh eyes and to grow as a person as the story grew," he says.

It also meant diving back into some of the darkest days of his life. The impetus for writing *The Whale* had come in part from Hunter's own experience with obesity in college. Though he'd since lost much of that weight, he knew first-hand what people like Charlie go through physically and socially. And while there are many causes of obesity, a multifactorial disease affecting over 40% of Americans, Hunter drew a direct link in his case between his excess weight and unaddressed feelings.

"I know many people who are big, happy, and healthy, but I wasn't," Hunter says. "I had a lot of unprocessed emotions from attending a fundamentalist Christian school where my sexuality came to bear in an ugly way, and that emerged in an unhealthy relationship with food. When I started writing *The Whale*, I think it all just came pouring out of me."

Through Charlie, Hunter found a place to explore the trauma and anger he had around his upbringing. When we meet Charlie, he's in a kind of literal and emotional limbo; physical because his size prevents him from moving very well, emotional because of the enormous roiling grief he has towards his dead partner, Alan. Unable to forgive himself for his own role in Alan's death and deeply guilty about his desertion of his young daughter and wife, Charlie begins to self-destruct through compulsive binge-eating.



“Unprocessed grief is the ground floor of everything for Charlie. He’s suffering from congestive heart failure, but maybe he’s really dying of the grief he’s never reconciled,” says Hunter.

Just before writing the play, Hunter started teaching at Rutgers University, tackling the class every freshman loves to dread—Expository Writing. His experience as a professor inspired the choice to make Charlie an online teacher, a job that allows him to hide physically from the world while still being able to engage socially. And it was this choice of career for Charlie that eventually helped Hunter flesh out Charlie’s motivations in the show, and why he’s so desperate to reconnect.

As a high school teacher, Charlie would be intimately acquainted with how important it is, both in essays and in life, to have a clarity of vision; to defend one’s position, to omit the unnecessary fluff, to get to the heart of the matter as clearly and concisely as possible. It’s this belief system that undergirds Charlie’s desire to reconnect with the people in his life—to tie up loose threads in the anticipation of a strong concluding paragraph—in what he believes are his final days on earth.

“Nobody likes expository writing, but I remember I got to a point where I was begging my students, please just write something truthful. Write anything you actually believe. That’s when one of my students wrote what is now a line in both the play and movie: ‘I think I need to accept that my life isn’t going to be very exciting.’ I will never forget reading that because it was like a sliver of light suddenly opened up on the page, and I could see this person and their humanity illuminated,” Hunter explains. “Charlie is looking for that, from himself and from others.”

Charlie’s pursuit of the truth is what brings him back in contact with his estranged daughter, Ellie, who disguises her wounds from Charlie’s abandonment with the thick, dark armor of her rage. Initially, she rebukes any attempt on Charlie’s end to spend time together, only relenting when he agrees to help her write her school essays.

“As a teacher, the only way Charlie can even hope to connect with Ellie is through her Moby-Dick essay,” says Hunter.

When Hunter began writing his play and delving into the dynamic between Charlie and Ellie, the experience felt strange, almost scary for him. He’d never felt so open and exposed before. “It felt completely different to me because I was so much more naked, not hiding behind anything, and it just felt really vulnerable.”

This vulnerability became part of the very mechanics of the play, a radical kind of honesty and openness that compelled or at least comforted audiences enough that they were willing to follow the show down the rabbit hole. But once Aronofsky was involved and the idea of a film adaptation was on the table, there was a new question at the forefront. Could Charlie’s story effectively be told on screen? Is it possible to make a single location, and a mostly static character, cinematic? There was an initial temptation to play with geography, to move some of the action beyond Charlie’s house and

into the outside world with new, invented characters, but both Hunter and Aronofsky eventually scrapped that idea.

“Darren and I were drawn to the challenge of keeping it all in this one space where the characters are trying to save one another. But it had to not feel claustrophobic,” says Hunter. “The atmosphere needed to feel inviting enough that audiences could lose themselves inside it.”

Subtle but significant, Hunter’s changes excited Aronofsky. “Sam wasn’t afraid to get innovative,” he says. “One example is the addition of the pizza delivery guy [portrayed by Sathya Sridharan], who creates one of the film’s biggest emotional moments. When I read the scene where he sees Charlie, I was completely convinced I’d seen it in the play, but it was new. When your brain turns an image on the page into something you think you saw before, you know it’s powerful.”

### **BRENDAN FRASER’S BRAVURA RETURN**

As a role that demands total vulnerability and exposure from its actor, playing Charlie would be a uniquely intense experience for any actor. Perhaps even more so for Brendan Fraser, who says he had to bring absolutely everything he had—a full-scale emotional intelligence, a wise-cracking sense of humor, a cavernous feeling of loss and anger—to nail his performance as a man on the edge of both ruin and revelation.

One of Hollywood’s most beloved actors, Fraser’s career has taken many turns, from blockbuster epics, beloved comedies, and a highly acclaimed role opposite Ian McKellen in the Oscar®-winning *Gods and Monsters*. But *The Whale* was something else entirely, with a set of demands that would make for a particularly courageous return to a major dramatic role. It wasn’t just the epic physical transformation—becoming Charlie was just as much about the psychological aspect, too. It was crucial that Charlie could push past audience expectations or stereotypes about his appearance, to compel them to follow Charlie on his journey and eventual transcendence, and to ultimately make them feel the weight of that experience in real time.

Fraser is open about the fact that he wrestled with doubts before production. “I admit I was intimidated. I had real fear going into this, but that just underlined for me the importance of digging even deeper than I knew I could. Maybe it was an antithetical choice, but I had never before been asked to do something like this: to combine everything I’ve learned in my professional life, to fit all the elements of character-building together into a unified whole, but also to put everything inside me on the line in this way,” he says. “And I was grateful for the chance.”

On set, he took to heart advice the masterful McKellen gave him: you have to do this like it’s the first time and also like it’s the last thing you’ll ever do. This fired up his readiness to go for broke, to shed every layer of defense, and to dive head-on into the space between self-doubt and hope.

“Everything I’ve got I’ve put on the screen,” Fraser says with raw emotion. “There was nothing I held back. It is all there.”

As he seized Charlie by the soul, Fraser did not shrink from his dark side, nor sentimentalize anything about a man whose life as a father, a teacher, a husband, and a boyfriend has come to pieces in his hands. “Charlie is no angel, but he is incredibly human. Inside I think he is Walt Whitman,” says Fraser, referring to the poet’s celebration of the human ability to be “large and contain multitudes.” Adds the actor, “Charlie is a lover of life and all its beauty, but he’s also in hiding.”

Charlie hides partly from the hate lobbed at him for his outward appearance, but even more so from the mistakes he’s made and the losses he cannot reconcile or move past. Fraser observes, “Charlie’s inability to move on from grief is borne of him not being able to be the person that he wanted to be. He is full of guilt over Alan’s passing, guilt over walking out on a life with his daughter, guilt over all the things that might have been.”

Fraser believes Charlie never wanted to hurt anyone, certainly not his daughter and not himself, either. “He’s not calculating or malevolent, but Charlie has done great harm mostly by not being forthcoming, not being authentic. And now he is in a battle of self-versus-self. He has put off squaring things with his loved ones for too long, and it’s nearly too late. When he tells his students they must find a way to tell the truth, he is preaching as much to himself as to anyone. So now it’s come down to these few days, and he has no idea if he will find any redemption or not.”

Like many people in crisis, Charlie is full of contradictory impulses. Even though he knows he’s dying, even though he actively rejects medical care that could save his life or ease his pain, he is still exquisitely alive to and in awe of the wonders of the world. He has an undeniable zeal for life, even as he essentially condemns himself to death in slow motion.

Fraser doesn’t see Charlie’s actions as purely self-destructive all the way down. By the time we meet him, he’s accepted his situation for what it is. “Charlie knows it is too late to turn the ship around,” he suggests, “but he also knows he can get people to respond to his vulnerability.”

Fraser related on a deeply personal level to Charlie’s ragged inner scars and noted that he felt that many people may end up feeling the same. “I do know all too well what it feels like to be mocked and ridiculed mercilessly,” he notes. “But maybe no more than anyone else in this world today, or anyone on social media. We all learn now how to turn off that hurt.”

It took Aronofsky ten years to find his Charlie. “I considered everyone—movie stars, unknowns, non-actors—but no one ever made sense,” he recalls. “I needed someone who you could believe was Charlie but had incredible depth. And then I spotted Brendan in a small part in a trailer for a Journey to the End of the Night and I lit up.”

In February 2020, Aronofsky gathered Fraser and other cast members for a scene-by-scene reading at St. Mark's Theatre in New York. Something magic happened there. "From moment one, I had chills," recalls Aronofsky. "I knew this was a movie, and I knew I wanted to make it with Brendan."

Hunter, who watched the reading, had that same sense of fate unfolding. "You could see Charlie's DNA in Brendan," he says. "He really, really understood what it is to feel loss as Charlie does. And he understood that if you played Charlie in a dark, brooding way, the story might die on the vine. Instead, what Brendan did was to directly connect to the joy and love in Charlie."

Also at the reading was two-time Oscar®-nominated editor Andrew Weisblum, who would enter into his fifth collaboration with Aronofsky on *The Whale*. He, too, keyed into the way Charlie took the audience from confrontation to stirring aspiration. "What lifted the story was Charlie's optimism and determination to make a connection with the one person that mattered most in his life, his daughter. That strong, emotional thread carries you through the dark," he says.

Soon after, Aronofsky told Fraser he planned to go ahead with the film. "I felt so lucky to be where I was. I have the deepest admiration for Darren and his work, and I saw the possibilities of what this film could be," Fraser remembers. "My heart leapt for joy at being part of this."

Just two weeks later, Covid lockdowns would halt all motion picture production. It would be a while before filming could safely start, but once it did, Fraser recalls that it felt like a balm for isolation. "Just coming to the set every day in these times, and devoting ourselves to this one man's world, seemed to unite us in a necessary way," he observes.

Before then, Fraser immersed himself in what he calls "hyper-focused research," learning directly from people living with obesity, watching every film in existence with a person of larger size to see how different actors approached it. He re-read Melville and later learned, with help from movement coach Beth Lewis, to navigate the apartment as Charlie does. He also had to get used to wearing the groundbreaking, 100-pound suit and prosthetic makeup that transformed his body.

Myths about obesity abound. Despite being an extremely common disease, it's also highly individual in its make-up, with aspects of genetic, metabolic, environmental, and psychological dimensions all contributing to the way it affects a person. Three million people are diagnosed with obesity every year, and yet the stigma against it remains rampant. This is reflected in the lack of honest representation of people with obesity in film and TV, and even more so when it comes to leading characters.

Hunter didn't set out to unravel all the complexities of weight bias when he wrote *The Whale*. But Charlie's story was deeply affecting, and the show sparked conversations wherever it went. Keenly aware of the importance of proper representation, Aronofsky

committed to learning as much as possible about the realities of the disease. He and Fraser consulted with Dr. Rachel Goldman, a psychologist who specializes in eating behaviors and the treatment of obesity, and with the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC), the nation's primary advocacy group. In addition to advising on language and logistics within the script, the OAC put them in touch with people willing to speak candidly and in-depth about their lived experience with obesity.

"Weight bias is one of the last frontiers of human beings finding ways to diminish one another," says Fraser. "Too often, people of Charlie's size are invisible, known only by their families or their caretakers, and we get only glimpses of who they might be. What I learned from talking with people is that, like everyone, they want their stories to be told, and they want to be treated fairly and honestly. And for me, that was another drive to aim for complete authenticity."

Hunter hopes the film will help break down another storytelling wall. "I feel it shouldn't be that novel for someone to write a character with obesity who is also a beautiful, flawed, loving, full human being," he says. "I would never say this is a story about all people who struggle with obesity, only that it came from my own personal experience. There are many different stories to tell, but hopefully, Charlie will be received on his own terms as someone who was written with compassion and love."

As much as Charlie's physicality is a core element of the story, Fraser hoped his performance would take audiences to a place where what Charlie's body looks like is ultimately less interesting than what Charlie thinks, feels, and longs for over the course of the film. "We get less than a week to know who this man is," he says. "I know people will be looking at first for the line between artifice and reality, but I hope it's invisible. Ultimately, I hope the amazing makeup is so well integrated that it fades into the background as you're swept up in the story itself."

Aronofsky stayed close to Fraser the whole way, protecting what he knew would be a very delicate state of mind once he stepped inside Charlie's persona. "There was a kind of marriage between the power of Sam's words and the bravery of Brendan's performance that gets beyond the surface, and you see a complete human being in all his multichromatic qualities," he says. "Mainly, Brendan and I talked about where we wanted to let the audience in and where we wanted to keep them out. Brendan is an incredibly charming and intelligent man, but Charlie can be selfish and irrational at times, so it was finding that balance in each moment."

To Fraser, Aronofsky has a rare ability to zero in on the finest, pointillist details. "Darren can see everything. He told me that if he hadn't been a filmmaker, he would have been a baseball umpire, and I get that because he always knows the call. He was very kind to me, an encouraging guide, pushing me when I needed it to dig a bit deeper and get it all out for the camera."

Equally, Fraser fell in love with Hunter's dialogue. "Sam sets real life to poetry," he comments. "He brings values and purpose to all his stories, but he also has a gift just for

vibrant, funny, candid language. He was there on the set every day, and his input was indispensable.”

Even as the performance extracted its toll of sweat and tears, Fraser came to feel such sincere love for Charlie that he missed him when the role ended. “I’ve never had that experience before,” he confesses. “It was such an intensely personal journey, and I came out the other side transformed. Which I hope is also true for people watching. I hope people will go with Charlie on this search for authenticity. I hope they feel that expressing the honest truth of who you are matters—that it mattered to Charlie, that it mattered to me, and that it matters in every life.”

### **CHARLIE’S VISITORS**

In the five days we spend with Charlie, we witness his attempt to reconnect with the daughter he left as a toddler and who now wants nothing to do with him. Now seventeen years old, Ellie is a razor-tongued, whip-smart, pent-up ball of absolute fury who prides herself on not needing anyone and who lashes out, even violently, to anyone who attempts to get close to her.

Her mother thinks she might be irredeemably evil. Charlie is convinced she’s brilliant, and that her cutting insight will become something special as long as she doesn’t follow his path of hiding his pain.

Charlie is convinced that Ellie will be the proof positive of his verdict that no one is incapable of caring. He’s so convinced of her potential that he is willing to weather her scorching wrath, even to do her homework for her, if it means spending time together. Says Fraser, “Ellie taunts her father, she toys with him, she’s mean to him, she messes with him, and she accuses him. Yet, she is beautiful in her burning rage and incandescent in her disdain. I think Charlie believes she’ll turn out to be a great writer, a truth-teller.” Is Charlie just projecting the daughter he wishes he had? Hunter says it was important to leave that question open. “Darren plays that up, and I think you need to have the audience question who she is because we mainly see her in the presence of her father. That’s such a charged situation that perhaps you never see the real Ellie at all, at least not until the final seconds,” Hunter suggests.

The role demanded a performance that would swerve every cliché of adolescent angst to become something fiercer. Aronofsky found that in Sadie Sink, best known as fan favorite Max Mayfield in “Stranger Things.” “I first became aware of Sadie like most people in the second season of ‘Stranger Things.’ She was spectacular and lit up the show whenever she was on screen,” Aronofsky says. “After Brendan was cast, I started thinking about how I was going to find a strong enough actor to stand up against him. Sadie came into my imagination and never left it.”

“Sadie has a huge career ahead of her,” continues Aronofsky. “She’s very smart and very, very instinctual, but she is also a highly technically attuned actor who knows how to work with the camera while tapping into the rawest emotions.”

Adds Fraser, “I absolutely believed in her, I believed in the internal world she brought in the door, and Sadie is so amazing she made me believe in Ellie’s future the way Charlie does.”

Sink took on the role with the excitement of someone facing her greatest challenge to date. “I’ve never poured myself into something so fully before,” she says. She envisioned herself gradually letting the audience past Ellie’s thick shield bit by bit, opening tiny glimmers into the vast well of her complex feelings about the father she loved as a child, the father she hated as a teenager, and the man asking for her forgiveness now.

“I enjoyed the chance to slowly peel back all of Ellie’s layers,” says Sink. “When you first meet her, you might think oh she’s just another angsty teen, and I’ve seen this before, but then you see she has this very dark, venomous side poking through. And then, as ruthless and mean as she can be, maybe you start to love her when you see where all this anger is coming from. Mostly, I hope people will have some sympathy for Ellie. Because for me, even though she is extreme in some of the choices she makes, this is a girl who is at a complete loss and searching for something.”

Sink perceives Ellie as being on a mission to shove her pain in her father’s face, to force him to own it. “She has villainized her father most of her life,” she explains. “They had this really special bond when she was young, but his abandonment left her and her mother in a downward spiral that hasn’t stopped. I think she shows up at his apartment in part because she truly wants to hurt him; she wants to show him, ‘look at what an awful person I have become because of you.’ She wants to cause him the kind of emotional pain he’s caused her. And there’s maybe even some relief for Ellie in seeing that her father is not in a good place. It gives her the upper hand. Just because he’s suffering, she’s not about to let up. She has something to say, and she’s going to say it.”

Ellie spends most of the film absolutely determined to feel nothing for her father, not even pity. But over time, a part of her begins to enjoy their conversations, even if most of them consist of the worst insult she can think of, only to be frustrated when Charlie finds her wit charming rather than hurtful. “Ellie’s super-power has always been that she has a real ability to see into people and figure them out,” notes Sink. “And I don’t think she’s ever been wrong about a person before like she’s wrong about Charlie. But I also don’t think she’s ever experienced the kind of unconditional love from anyone that he shows to her. That’s what throws her for a loop.”

For Sink, Ellie is the most exposed she has ever been in her life in the film’s final moments. And like Charlie, Sink wants to believe Ellie has the potential to break out of her antipathy for humanity after what she experiences. “If Charlie has it in him to forgive her and to love her after everything that she says to him, maybe she can do that, too,” Sink concludes. “Maybe she can see some of the good in people. The story of *The Whale* is so much about how complicated human nature is, and Ellie can be interpreted in several ways, but I find myself rooting for her.”

In complete contrast to Ellie's angry resentment and withholding is Liz, Charlie's longtime best friend and devoted caretaker, played by Hong Chau.

Liz is a complicated woman. Sharp and scolding one minute, generous and protective the next, she is haunted by a past trauma that bonds her to Charlie and also allows her to enable his worst impulses. She loves Charlie, but it becomes clear that a part of that love is the way Charlie represents her last link to her brother, Alan.

A Golden Globe® nominee for *Downsizing* and recently seen in the hit HBO "Watchmen", Chau struck Aronofsky immediately for her expansive fluidity and exploratory instincts. "Hong brings a completely different interpretation every time the camera rolls. She never runs out of new approaches, new ideas, which is a tremendous gift to a filmmaker," he says. "At the same time, she always sees the bigger picture."

Chau felt a magnetic pull to the human intricacy of the script. "It's a story about honesty, acceptance, and love, but those are not at all easy things for humans to fully confront in life—and that's where Sam Hunter's play goes," she says.

Liz is a person of rich contrasts. She cares so deeply and steadfastly for Charlie, and is terrified about losing him—yet she still yields to his food addiction, perhaps in order to fulfill her own desire to be needed.

"I saw Liz as someone who is really searching for something to anchor herself to, in that way some people search for a cause or a person to which they can devote their entire life," observes Chau. "But it's also really complicated because she is in many ways aiding and abetting Charlie's most harmful behaviors, even if it's out of love. Yet, I think we all have instances in our lives when we look the other way for someone we care about."

In exploring Liz's mix of dependency and generosity, Chau thought a lot about her specific upbringing. "Part of what makes Liz tick is she had a tumultuous childhood growing up as an Asian adoptee in a religious family in small-town Idaho, which is a lot," she observes. "And then to have her adopted brother die, the only person who ever brought her happiness and made her feel OK, that all becomes part of her relationship with Charlie. I asked myself many times why Liz didn't just leave Idaho completely. Really, I think it would have been the simplest thing for her to just bail on this situation. But it's much harder to stick around and watch somebody you truly love go through what Charlie is going through. That takes a lot of heart and energy."

v

With Fraser, Chau found the instant depth and trust of long-term friendship, even though they didn't know each other previously. She credits Fraser's complete immersion into Charlie. "One of the most exciting things about doing this film is that it's not often that you get so surprised by a performance," she says. "Brendan is magnificent as Charlie. And he is also beyond a nice person—he has this quality where you immediately want to hug him. The first time I saw Brendan as Charlie, all I saw was this angelic face I just wanted to care for."



Fraser says of Chau, “Hong brought a commitment that has been unrivaled in the 30 years I’ve worked in movies. Like her character, she has boundless empathy.”

Chau also felt awe watching Aronofsky at work. She observes, “Darren has a way of being so technically brilliant it can make you think he’s not feeling the emotions, but then you realize he is, and very deeply. When I saw the final film, I was amazed not only at how gratifying and moving it is but how exciting and big it felt. It has this almost nautical energy, between the way Matthew Libatique shot it and the music and the pacing. I don’t think there is anyone other than Darren who could bring such visual excitement to a story set in one apartment.”

One of Charlie’s most complicated and moving visitors is Mary, his ex-wife. This is a woman who has loved Charlie and seen the absolute worst of him. He broke her heart, and she hates him for that, yet still harbors a lingering tenderness towards him. Seeing him in his current state, she vacillates between disgust, pity, terror, and affection. Mary is a deeply complex character, and her portrayal by two-time Oscar® nominee Samantha Morton is a revelation in its mix of biting poignancy and confessional urgency.

Morton was the last cast member to join the ensemble, but Fraser remembers the frisson and sense of intimacy between them was instantaneous. “Samantha came in part way through production and astonished us all,” Fraser says, “because you feel instantly she’s long been married to Charlie and carries a complex mix of feelings about him. She’s one of those actors who seems almost as if she’s missing a layer most of us wear—I don’t know if it’s skin or energy or what, but there’s a magical transparency to her.”

It’s this transparency and energy that allows her to so expertly and immediately dismantle the tired “resentful ex-wife” stereotype. Morton’s Mary is a tremendous, ever-shifting mixture of affection and bewilderment, regret, and rage. Her encounter with Charlie—seeing him for the first time in person since he left her all those years ago—is heartbreaking and astonishing in the way it moves from tight-lipped anger to reminiscent laughter to desperate tears and then back again.

Aronofsky recalls Morton’s endless search for honesty in her movements and in every line. “She had to find the reality of her place in space to open her heart and allow pure emotional truth to shoot out of her lungs,” says Aronofsky. “She can’t fake it, doesn’t want to fake it, and so she ends up summoning from deep inside, and that’s breathtaking to witness.”

Finding Thomas—the seemingly naïve young missionary who rings Charlie’s doorbell and decides to save his soul—was one of the biggest casting challenges. “Thomas needed an innocence so believable you buy him as someone who went straight from Iowa to Idaho. It’s very hard to come up with anyone like that now because we’re all so worldly,” Aronofsky says. He found this quality and the skill to reverse it in 20-year-old Ty Simpkins, who until now has mainly been seen in blockbusters such as Jurassic World, Iron Man 3, and Avengers. “Ty was a wonderful discovery, and he just got better

and better as filming went along,” Aronofsky comments.

Simpkins and Sink discovered their own riveting rapport. Though their characters couldn't be more different—Thomas desperate to remain humble and merciful while Ellie is brutal and manipulative—they share a sense of alienation under the skin. “Thomas is someone Ellie can see isn't quite what he appears, and she determines she is going to push him to tell her his deepest secrets, which he does,” Sink muses. “Ty and I had a lot of fun playing with that scene.”

While Chau's Liz is constantly at Simpkins's throat in their scenes together, Chau says that Simpkins was a joy to work with as a scene partner. “Ty really sank his teeth into this role, and he worked so hard,” she comments. “Both he and Sadie really rose to the occasion, and it was something beautiful to see. We were only five people in the cast, but it was the sweetest group I've ever worked with.”

## **BECOMING CHARLIE**

Fraser's performance became a rare fusion between actor and extensive prosthetic makeup. Aronofsky had envisioned Charlie's weight to be at the farthest human extreme, severe enough to be life-threatening, but he also wanted to make sure that Fraser's face wouldn't be covered in a way that obfuscated his emotional range of expression.

To accomplish this monumental task, the filmmaker turned to a trusted and deeply creative collaborator: Oscar®-nominated Adrien Morot, who worked with Aronofsky on *The Fountain*, *Noah*, and *mother!* For *The Whale*, Morot would pioneer the first-ever all-digital prosthetic makeup, among other innovations. So-called “fat suits” have had a fraught history in filmmaking, at times used to stigmatize or mock, which spurred Aronofsky and Morot to delve into how to create Charlie's full size both organically and respectfully, approaching it as an extension to Fraser's portrayal.

“Adrien was one of the first people I contacted when I started thinking about *The Whale*. I knew without him the film wouldn't be possible. He rose to the challenge with endless research and eventually it became clear he needed to reinvent the wheel by enlisting new technologies,” says Aronofsky. “He was a remarkable partner in figuring out how to make the illusion of Charlie's body real.”

Fraser found he was moved to his core the first time he saw the full set of prosthetics Morot had created. “I thought, ‘this should hang in the Tate Modern’” he recalls. “The detail was so intricate; the airbrushing technique truly brought out the transparency of skin and the blue of the veins beneath, there was deep concern for physics and how gravity affects the skin, but you could also feel the love and compassion that went into creating it.”

Over the 40-day shoot, Fraser would develop an intense love-hate relationship with the arduous makeup process, which took up to four hours each session to apply, and the suit, which took five people to get on and off at the end of each day. Once the suit was on, Fraser was able to remove an arm so he could eat, but even leaving the set

momentarily for a break required the aid of others. The suit had a built-in cooling system much like those used for formula one race car drivers, though it was still incredibly hot. Fraser ultimately got so used to wearing it that when he took it off, he began to feel dizzy, lacking in equilibrium, the way you feel unsteady stepping onto land after sailing on a boat.

“The part you can’t see on screen is how much intensive rehearsal it took to learn how to move inside it,” Fraser says. “I developed a whole new set of muscles I didn’t even know existed. It was by far the hardest physical journey I’ve taken as an actor. Running around in the desert when I was younger was a cakewalk compared to this, I promise you.”

The suit also had a more symbolic heft to it. “It was not just the physical but emotional weight of it that was important,” Fraser reflects. “When everything you do takes a monumental effort, it makes your choices feel that much more important.”

Morot already knew Aronofsky likes to play at the technical edges while seeking perfection, a rather tricky combination. He has enjoyed rising to that high bar. But he still wasn’t fully prepared with just how far *The Whale* would push his skillset. He had done weight gain prosthetics before, but it became clear early on that the current technology and practices weren’t going to meet the standard that this film required. He would need to carve his own way.

Morot began poring over every example of a detailed weight gain suit he could find throughout cinema history, but he was quickly frustrated by the fact that nearly all the relevant examples were either used for comedic or fantasy purposes. So, he shifted gears, realizing that what he wanted didn’t exist yet, and that he needed to study real bodies themselves to understand the task at hand.

As Morot began his early designs, it became clear Fraser would also have to wear facial prosthetics so the line between actor and body would be seamless. “Darren wanted a clear view of Brendan’s expressions, but we found ways to merge the prosthetics to his face that allows full movement of the muscles,” Morot says.

This led to the decision to do all the prosthetics digitally—something never attempted before for a major feature. Unlike the standard method of starting with a life cast of Fraser, then sculpting the head manually with clay before forging silicon pieces, Morot streamlined the entire process inside a computer. He used 3D modeling to create a digital sculpture and then jumped straight to 3D printing for the entire process, skipping the clay sculpting entirely.

“I had been testing this for a while, and I told Darren that this is going to be very risky,” Morot explains, “but it made some sense to try it. The advantages for *The Whale* were numerous, especially because Darren is such a perfectionist. Not only was it faster to get to the initial sculpture, but it was much easier to make Darren’s many changes to the sculpture. We were able to get the version he was happiest with right down to the

size of the pores and wrinkles.”

Morot says no matter how careful the makeup, it only worked because Fraser brought that emotional alchemy that enlivened it. “This is the first time in my career I’ve ever had tears in my eyes while working, and it happened several times watching Brendan. It’s an out-of-this-world performance, and I hope people don’t see the makeup so much as they see Charlie,” he says.

## **THE WORLD OF THE WHALE**

Aronofsky’s conception of *The Whale* initially was centered around the script and the performances first and foremost. But he knew that the single-location setting—Charlie’s one bedroom apartment—was a crucial character in the visual narrative of the film.

All things considered, *The Whale* may be the most pared-down film Aronofsky has ever made. But that doesn’t mean the design process was simple or easy. Figuring out exactly what Charlie’s home would look like, what would need to be considered for his mobility limitations, where and how his inner life (or past life with Alan) should come through—all of it was a painstaking, character-driven process.

Rehearsal began four weeks before production at the Umbra Studios in Newburgh, New York. Every scene was meticulously blocked out, and the floor was taped as the power dynamics between the characters turned from theoretical to physical. “I knew the actors were prepping their emotional journeys and I wanted to give them time to do that, so we started with blocking,” Aronofsky explains. “If we could figure out ways to keep things moving it would solve one of the major challenges of the film. The big question was always how do we make a story that takes place all in one apartment, and mostly in one room, feel truly exciting for the audience.”

The answer came from the collaboration between Aronofsky and his longtime cinematographer, two-time Oscar® nominee Matthew Libatique. Together, they worked out every angle of the film in advance of shooting. Though Libatique and Aronofsky are known for their use of handheld camera stylings, for *The Whale* they returned to the more classical camera movements utilized during *The Fountain*. Through the use of cranes and dollies, they composed a shot list that was focused on amplifying intimacy, tension, and almost a kind of breathless urgency—all in a confined, single location.

“Matty is my brother-in-arms, and he’s brilliant in the way he uses light to paint. Stylistically, this was a real departure for us from our last movie together, mother!®, which was fully handheld, but he came in full of ideas that helped me to figure out how to move the camera around this room in interesting ways.”

The pair looked at various Hollywood theatrical adaptations, especially Mike Nichols’ *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Elia Kazan’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* but, says Aronofsky, “ultimately you need to return to the text. The story always tells you where the camera should be.” Lighting played as much a role as movement. “Matthew lit the apartment like it was a cathedral,” says Fraser. “I was constantly bumping into little

patches of lamps with Charlie's walker. He is a master of using light to shift the mood and match the weather."

Production designers Mark Friedberg and Robert Pyzocha, who recently worked together creating Joker's twisted Gotham cityscape, had to think inside-out, using a small space to evoke a vast internal world. Charlie's apartment came to life as modest, cozy, professorial space—lots of books and framed photos—but also as a kind of sequestered refuge, a place to hide, where he could remain comfortably sedentary.

"It required clever brilliance from the production designers to bring so much life to this single room. One of the biggest breakthroughs was the placement of Charlie's couch," Aronofsky says. "Most apartments have the couch against a wall, but they found a way to float his couch in the middle of the room while keeping it organic. It seems simple, but it perfectly opened everything up and afforded us many more opportunities for movement."

Each facet of the room had a reason for being, right down to the titles of the books on the shelves, which were pulled from the set designer's own collection. "In every detail, you believe this man lives there," says Fraser.

Aronofsky also reunited with Oscar®-nominated costume designer Danny Glicker, who worked with him on *Mother!* "It was super challenging to design clothes that work with Adrien's makeup," notes Aronofsky. "Clothing that fits Charlie is hard to source in the world, so Danny had limited options, with a limited palette, and limited financial resources chained to major technical handcuffs. To do something so befitting of the character was much harder than it looks."

During post-production, the film's escalation of emotional suspense was fine-tuned in Andrew Weisblum's editing bay. "Andy has the most incredible sensitivities to story, to emotion, to timing. He's able to hold conflicting elements in his mind, and he's able to blend consummate technical skills with deep emotion as few can," Aronofsky comments.

Weisblum was struck early on by Charlie's optimism about the future, despite knowing that he has days to live. This seeming contradiction became a driving theme in Weisblum's editing process. "I was aware the film could end up being overly melodramatic if we were not careful," he says. "But the film has so much humor and positivity that I think it outweighs that. And for that reason, I always felt it was important for things to play very naturally."

Weisblum was already impressed with the dynamism of the footage he saw early on in production and relished the process of building on that foundation. "Darren and Matty had found ways to keep the room cinematically exciting using camera placement, framing, and movement without ever allowing it to become too showy or self-conscious," he says. "In the editing, Darren and I then talked about how we were going to use these shots grammatically. In terms of pacing, obviously, it was a challenge because the story is so linear. So, there was only so much you could lift out or change without being

beholden to the structure. There wasn't much wiggle room, but we found a few tricks to condense and simplify."

The finishing touches to the film came from Rob Simonsen's sensitive, nuanced score. "This is the first time I've worked with Rob, and I found him to be an incredibly curious person, very, very hard working and able to layer melancholy with inspiration in the most beautiful ways," says Aronofsky. Weisblum comments on Simonsen's score, "We didn't want the music to push the already strong emotions or be too stylized. Rob did a great job of helping us find that balance."

As *The Whale*'s acceleration mounts, every element of the design and performances build to its transcendent finale. In response, Hunter altered the script's ending slightly from the original play.

In the stage version, the piece ends on a hard cut to black. In the film, we see Charlie take a step towards the light. It's a heightened moment, maybe even fantastical. The boldness of it excites Aronofsky. "Matty and I had the idea early on that the weather would evolve over the course of the piece. Rain comes, but on the last day, the sun is out, so when the door opens, the light is shooting down onto Charlie. When you make a big choice like that, you've just got to throw everything you have at it and hope you've done enough that the audience comes with you."

Weisblum notes that the scene was designed as a mirror image of the first scene with Ellie. "It was important to set that up structurally, these two moments that reflect each other—where in one Charlie fails and in the other, he succeeds. The cutting patterns and shot choices of the two scenes are very similar. But the power of that final scene is that we know Charlie is facing the end."

While filming, Fraser wasn't sure how it would work. But when he saw the finished film, the impact floored him. "I couldn't leave my chair," he recalls. "I had to sit there and gather myself. It wasn't that I was sad; I was just overwhelmed."

The finished film was also a form of solace for Aronofsky. He lost both his mother Charlotte and father Abraham this past year, and *The Whale* is dedicated to them. "My parents were fixtures on all my sets, they acted in several of my movies, and this was the first time they could not come to the set because of Covid restrictions," Aronofsky relates. "My mom passed before I had a cut of the film, but my dad was around, and he was able to see the movie with the dedication to my mother on it."

*The Whale* has been resonating beyond its confines since audiences first met Charlie on stage. For Hunter, the film grants Charlie another new life far beyond expectations. "Mostly, I hope the film is an invitation for people to walk through the door of someone they've never met before, and maybe who they wouldn't have imagined meeting," says the writer. "And once you do accept that invitation, I think the meaning and the joy of it become something very personal."



# THE CAST

## **Brendan Fraser - Actor (CHARLIE)**

Seamlessly transitioning from smart independent films to action-packed blockbusters, Brendan Fraser continues to garner widespread critical acclaim for his versatile, inspired performances as well as his keen eye for selecting thought-provoking material.

Recently Fraser starred alongside Don Cheadle and Benicio Del Toro in Steven Soderbergh's *No Sudden Move* for HBO Max. He can be seen in the hit HBO Max/DC Entertainment series *Doom Patrol*; crime narrative *Line of Descent*; the ten-part series *Professionals*; *The Secret of Karma*; *The Poison Rose*; *Trust*, an FX anthology series where he starred opposite Donald Sutherland and Hilary Swank; and *Condor*.

Other credits include Showtime's award-winning TV show, *The Affair*, *The Field*, and A&E mini-series, *Texas Rising*, starring alongside Bill Paxton, Ray Liotta, Jeffrey Dean Morgan and Olivier Martinez. Fraser previously starred in the feature, *Gimme Shelter*, opposite Rosario Dawson and Vanessa Hudgens; voiced characters in two animated films as Scorch Supernova in The Weinstein Company's *Escape from Planet Earth*; Open Road Films' *The Nut Job*, with Will Arnett and Katherine Heigl; and *Whole Lotta Sole*, a heist comedy directed by Terry George in which Brendan starred and served as Executive Producer. In 2008, Fraser had an incredible summer at the box office. The Newline/Warner Bros. release of *Journey to the Center of the Earth in 3-D*, which he starred in and served as Executive Producer, has grossed more than \$100 million domestically. The film is the first live-action feature to be filmed entirely in 3D. More credits include *Inkheart*, *GI Joe: The Rise Of the Cobra*, *The Air I Breathe*, *George of the Jungle*, *Furry Vengeance*, *Extraordinary Measures*, *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*, *Bedazzled*, *Monkey Bone*, *Blast From the Past*, *Dudley Do-Right*, *Mrs. Winterbourne*, *Encino Man*, *School Ties*, *With Honors*, *Airheads*, *The Scout*, and *The Twilight of the Gods*. Brendan has been in a string of some of the most successful independent films of the past decade including Lionsgate's Academy Award-winning Best Picture *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis; Phillip Noyce's *The Quiet American*, based on Graham Greene's 1955 thriller of the same name; and Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters*, opposite Sir Ian McKellen and Lynn Redgrave.

Fraser is most well-known for his role in Universal's *Mummy* Franchise as Rick O'Connell. Stephen Sommers' 1999 smash hit action/horror adventure, *The Mummy*, was an ambitious retooling of the 1932 horror classic, with Brendan cast as an American serving in the French Foreign Legion who becomes involved with an English archaeological expedition and the ancient secrets they unleash. In 2001, Fraser reteamed with Sommers and co-star Rachel Weisz on the film's sequel, *The Mummy Returns*. In 2008, Universal released *Mummy 3: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*.

Brendan made his Broadway debut, starring in the comedy *Elling*, based on the Norwegian novels by Ingvar Ambjørnsen. Fraser's diverse theatre roster includes his appearance at the Lyric Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue in London, in the West End production of



Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Brendan also received high praise for his work as the anxious writer in John Patrick Shanley's *Four Dogs and a Bone* at the Geffen Playhouse in which he co-starred with Martin Short, Parker Posey and Elizabeth Perkins for director Lawrence Kasdan.

Born in Indianapolis and raised in Europe and Canada, Brendan has been dedicated to honing his craft since an early age of 12 and began attending theater when his family lived in London. He attended high school at Toronto's Upper Canada College and received a BFA in acting from the Actor's Conservatory, Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle.

### **Hong Chau - Actor (LIZ)**

Hong Chau is best known for her role in the Paramount film *Downsizing* (2017, dir. Alexander Payne) as Vietnamese amputee and political activist Ngoc Lan Tran. For her performance, she was nominated for a Golden Globe® Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in any Motion Picture, the Screen Actors Guild Award® for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Supporting Role, and several other awards for best supporting actress. Before *Downsizing*, she appeared in the HBO television series *Treme* and the Warner Bros. film *Inherent Vice* (2014, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson). She has appeared as a guest star in several TV series, including Netflix's *Bojack Horseman* and HBO's *Big Little Lies*, amongst others.

Her performance in *Driveways* (2019, dir. Andrew Ahn), which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, earned her a Best Female Lead nomination for the 2020 Film Independent Spirit Awards.

Chau can currently be seen in the HBO series *Watchmen* and the Amazon series *Homecoming*.

Up next for her are two A24 films, *The Whale* (dir. Darren Aronofsky), opposite Brendan Fraser and *Showing Up* (dir. Kelly Reichardt), opposite Michelle Williams, as well as Searchlight's *The Menu* (dir. Mark Mylod). Hong is kept very busy, as she recently wrapped on *Asteroid City* (dir. Wes Anderson) and the Netflix limited series *The Night Agent*.

Chau was born to Vietnamese parents who lived in a refugee camp in Thailand after fleeing Vietnam in the late 1970s. After growing up in New Orleans, Chau majored in film studies at Boston University and pursued an acting career.

### **Sadie Sink - Actor (ELLIE)**

Sadie Sink has already made a name for herself in the world of entertainment. She began her career on Broadway as the title role in the revival of *Annie* in 2013. She then went on to appear opposite Helen Mirren in the Tony®-nominated *The Audience*, directed by Stephen Daldry in 2017.

Sadie joined the cast of the critically acclaimed Netflix hit series *Stranger Things* in 2017 where she stars as Max, a girl who moves to Hawkins with a complicated history and a suspicious streak, alongside the Emmy®-nominated cast. She can currently be seen in the fourth season of the series on Netflix. She was also seen in the Lionsgate film *The Glass Castle*, based on the Jeannette Walls bestselling novel that same year where she portrayed a young Lori alongside Naomi Watts and Woody Harrelson. Most recently she starred in Netflix's *Fear Street 2* and will next be seen in Darren Aronofsky film *The Whale*.

She also starred in the NBC hit series *American Odyssey* alongside Anna Friel, and made guest appearances on many television shows including *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, *Blue Bloods*, and *The Americans*. In addition, she was seen alongside Elisabeth Moss and Liev Schreiber in *Chuck*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2017.

### **Ty Simpkins - Actor (THOMAS)**

Ty Simpkins has quickly established himself as a highly sought-after actor in film. By the time he was 18, Simpkins had worked with some of the best directors in Hollywood, including Steven Spielberg, Sam Mendes, James Wan, Paul Haggis, Reed Morano, and Colin Trevorrow.

Ty will next be seen in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale* for A24 opposite Brendan Fraser and Sadie Sink. He will also star as the lead of Patrick Wilson's directorial debut, *Insidious 5*, which follows his character from the first two films, now in college, and the film will be released next July. He also recently finished filming for *The Re-Education of Molly Singer* starring opposite Britt Robertson and Jaime Pressly.

In addition, Ty has starred in two of the biggest blockbusters of all time. Simpkins was seen opposite Bryce Dallas Howard and Chris Pratt in Universal's box office monster hit, *Jurassic World*. Prior to that, he starred opposite Robert Downey Jr. in Disney/Marvel's *Iron Man 3*. This film holds the record as the eighth highest grossing superhero film of all time. Ty made his feature debut in Steven Speilberg's *War of the Worlds* starring alongside Tom Cruise and Dakota Fanning. Simpkins also starred in the psychological drama *Meadowland* opposite Olivia Wilde, Elisabeth Moss, and Luke Wilson, which premiered at the 2015 Tribeca Film Festival to rave reviews.

### **Simpkins - Actor (MARY)**

Multi-award-winning British actress Samantha Morton first garnered international attention in 1997 starring in Carine Adler's *Under the Skin*, earning her the Boston Film Critics Award for Best Actress. She has since gone on to work with such acclaimed directors as Woody Allen (*Sweet and Lowdown*, 1999), Lynne Ramsay (*Morvern Callar*, 2002), Steven Spielberg (*Minority Report*, 2002), Jim Sheridan (*In America*, 2002), Michael Winterbottom (*Code 46*, 2003), Shekhar Kapur (*The Golden Age*, 2007), Harmony Korine (*Mister Lonely*, 2007), Anton Corbijn (*Control*, 2007), Charlie Kaufman (*Synecdoche, New York*, 2008), David Cronenberg (*Cosmopolis* 2012), Andrew Stanton (*John Carter*, 2012), Spike Jonze (*Her*, 2013) and David Yates (*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, 2016). In a highly decorated career Morton has twice been nominated for an Academy Award®, twice nominated for a BAFTA award and in 2007 she received a Best Actress Golden

Globe® for her portrayal of notorious child-murderer Myra Hindley in the NBC/Channel 4 film Longford. In 2009, Morton made her directorial debut with The Unloved, a semi autobiographical film based in the British children's care system, winning the BAFTA Television Award for Best Single Drama. Recently Morton has starred in the hit Hulu/BBC tv show Harlots and AMC's award-winning The Walking Dead, where she played the iconic villain, Alpha. In 2020 Samantha was nominated for a Best Actress BAFTA for the Dominic Savage drama I Am Kirsty. Samantha recently finished filming the movie Save the Cinema.

This Autumn Samantha will appear in the Starz period drama The Serpent Queen, Darren Aronofsky's psychological drama The Whale and She Said.

## THE CREW

### **Darren Aronofsky - Director, Producer**

Academy Award®-nominated filmmaker Darren Aronofsky was born and raised in Brooklyn. Aronofsky heads Protozoa Pictures based in Chinatown NYC.

His upcoming film The Whale for A24 stars Brendan Fraser, Sadie Sink, Hong Chau, and Samantha Morton.

Aronofsky wrote and directed 2017's mother! starring Jennifer Lawrence and Javier Bardem. Before that, Aronofsky made the 2014 box office hit "Noah" starring Russell Crowe, Jennifer Connelly, and Anthony Hopkins.

In 2010, Aronofsky received a Best Director Academy Award® nomination for his indie box office phenomenon Black Swan starring Natalie Portman, who won a Best Actress Academy Award® for her performance. 2008's The Wrestler starring Mickey Rourke won the Golden Lion for the best film at the Venice Film Festival. Previous to that were the acclaimed and award-winning films The Fountain (2006), Requiem for a Dream (2000), and π (1998).

As a producer under his Protozoa label, Aronofsky has been responsible for Jackie which garnered three Academy Awards®, the documentary Some Kind of Heaven' which premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, artist Prune Nourry's docu-memoir Serendipity which made its world premiere at the 2019 Berlin Film Festival, Pacified which won the Golden Shell top prize at the San Sebastián International Film Festival, Catch the Fair One' which premiered at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival where it won the Audience Award, and the documentary feature The Territory which premiered at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival and won both the Audience Award and Special Jury Award for Craft in the World Cinema Documentary category.

Up next, he serves as producer on *The Good Nurse* starring Jessica Chastain and Eddie Redmayne and an adaptation of Octavia Butler's masterpiece *Kindred* from FX.

Aronofsky has executive produced the six-part docu-series *Welcome to Earth*, the Emmy®-nominated series *One Strange Rock*, and the upcoming *Limitless* starring Chris Hemsworth for National Geographic.

His first book *Monster Club* written for middle school readers will be released September 13.

### **Samuel D. Hunter - Screenplay**

Samuel D. Hunter grew up in Moscow, Idaho and lives in NYC. He is the recipient of a 2014 MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship for his work as a playwright. His plays include *The Whale* (Drama Desk Award, Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Play, GLAAD Media Award, Drama League nomination for Best Play, and Outer Critics Circle nomination for Best Play), *A Case for the Existence of God* (New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play), *A Bright New Boise* (Obie Award, Drama Desk nomination for Best Play), *Greater Clements* (Drama Desk nomination for Best Play, Outer Critics Circle Honoree), *Lewiston/Clarkston* (Drama Desk nomination for Best Play), *The Few*, *A Great Wilderness*, *Rest*, *Pocatello*, *The Healing*, and *The Harvest*, among others. He is the recipient of a Whiting Writers Award and holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Idaho. He was a writer and producer on all four seasons of the FX show *Baskets*. His work has been produced Off Broadway by Lincoln Center Theater, Playwrights Horizons, LCT3, Signature Theatre, Page 73, Clubbed Thumb, and Rattlestick Playwrights Theater. Elsewhere, his plays have been produced by Theatre Royal Bath, Dallas Theater Center, Seattle Rep, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Woolly Mammoth, South Coast Rep, and Victory Gardens, among others. Two anthologies of his plays are available from TCG Books, a third is forthcoming. He is a member of New Dramatists and a Resident Playwright at NYC's Signature Theatre. He holds degrees in playwriting from NYU, The Iowa Playwrights Workshop, and Juilliard.

### **Ari Handel - Producer**

Ari Handel holds a doctorate in Neuroscience and has published four papers on the neural control of saccadic eye movements. He left academia to become President of Protozoa Pictures where he has been a writer on the films *The Fountain* and *Noah*; a producer on *mother!* and *Jackie*; an executive producer on *Some Kind of Heaven*, *White Boy Rick*, *Noah*, *Black Swan*, *Catch The Fair One*, and *The Territory*; and a co-producer on *The Wrestler*. He is an executive producer on the National Geographic science series *One Strange Rock* and *Welcome to Earth* and has proudly served on the board of storytelling organization *The Moth* for nearly two decades. *The Fountain*.

### **Jeremy Dawson - Producer**

Jeremy Dawson began his film career designing the title sequence for Darren Aronofsky's debut feature, *π* before moving on to become an Academy Award® nominated and Golden Globe®-winning producer. He recently wrapped production as producer of *Wes*

Anderson's Asteroid City, as well as Anderson's forthcoming Roald Dahl anthology, The Wonderful Story Of Henry Sugar and Two More. His previous notable projects include the The French Dispatch, the animated feature Isle Of Dogs, The Grand Budapest Hotel (which won the 2015 Golden Globe® for Best Motion Picture, Comedy or Musical, and was nominated for nine Academy Awards® including Best Picture), and Fox Searchlight's Me and Earl and the Dying Girl (which won both the Grand Jury and Audience Award at The 2015 Sundance Film Festival), as well as Anderson's Moonrise Kingdom, Fantastic Mr. Fox, and The Darjeeling Limited (co-producer). Dawson began his continuing association with Wes Anderson when he served as visual effects supervisor on The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou and also designed visual effects and animation for numerous films, including Julie Taymor's Frida, Aronofsky's Requiem For A Dream and The Fountain.

### **Matthew Libatique - Director of Photography**

Academy Award®-nominated cinematographer Matthew Libatique, ASC's credits span a wide array of genres, showcasing his extensive creativity and ability to adapt to any style of film.

Currently in production on Bradley Cooper's Maestro, Libatique recently completed work on The Whale for A24 Studios, where he reteamed with his frequent collaborator Darren Aronofsky.

In addition to shooting Don't Worry Darling with director Olivia Wilde, they collaborated on the short Wake Up which premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival.

Previously, Libatique shot Ryan Murphy's The Prom and the Suicide Squad spinoff, Birds of Prey, in which Margot Robbie reprised her role as crazed criminal Harley Quinn. The film is the first theatrically released R-rated film in the DC Extended Universe.

He received Academy Award® and American Society of Cinematographers nominations for his lensing of Bradley Cooper's directorial debut, A Star is Born starring Lady Gaga. He also lensed Native Son for director Rashid Johnson, which premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival.

Libatique photographed Aronofsky's directorial debut Pi; Requiem for a Dream; The Fountain; the critically acclaimed Black Swan, for which he received his first Oscar® nomination; Noah; and mother! starring Jennifer Lawrence.

Additionally, he shot the award-nominated Straight Outta Compton, as well as Iron Man and Iron Man 2, kicking off a defining style for the Marvel franchise.

### **Mark Friedberg - Production Designer**

Mark Friedberg's early roots in fine art have served as the foundation for all his subsequent work designing for film. He began his career in New York working on cult classics, such as Alexandre Rockwell's In the Soup (Audience Award at Sundance) and Maggie Greenwald's The Ballad of Little Joe.

Friedberg has gone on to collaborate with a variety of independent mavericks - among them: Herb Gardner (I'm Not Rappaport), Mira Nair (Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love), Ang Lee (The Ice Storm, Ride with the Devil, Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk), Todd Haynes (Far From Heaven, Wonderstruck), Jim Jarmusch (Paterson, Coffee and Cigarettes, Broken Flowers), Ed Harris (Pollock) and Charlie Kaufman (Synecdoche, New York).

In 2004, Mark joined forces with Wes Anderson to make The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou and, subsequently, The Darjeeling Limited. He went on to collaborate with the iconic Julie Taymor on Across the Universe and The Tempest.

Mark has been able to laugh a little in his collaborations with Mel Brooks (The Producers) and Garry Marshall (Runaway Bride, New Year's Eve). In 2011, Mark designed Todd Hayne's Mildred Pierce (for which he won the Emmy® Award for Outstanding Art Direction). One of the films Mark is most proud to have worked on is Ava DuVernay's Selma.

Mark most recently finished designing The Whale for Darren Aronofsky with whom he also made the epic Noah. Other recent work includes Todd Phillips' Joker, and several collaborations with Barry Jenkins including, If Beale Street Could Talk, The Underground Railroad, and the upcoming Lion King prequel.

### **Robert Pyzocha - Production Designer**

Robert Pyzocha is a New York City-based Production Designer working primarily in film. The Whale is his first collaboration with Darren Aronofsky and Protozoa Pictures. Robert just completed designing the dark thriller Black Flies with French Director Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire. Robert's Art Direction credits include: Dead Ringers, The Underground Railroad, Joker, John Wick 2 & 3, Ocean's 8, If Beale Street Could Talk, Wonderstruck, Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (Morocco Unit), Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The Tempest, Across The Universe, and The Darjeeling Limited. Robert is thrilled to be working with A24.

### **Danny Glicker - Costume Designer**

The Whale reteams Danny Glicker with Darren Aronofsky, for whom he designed the costumes for mother!.

Danny Glicker has recently been honored with a nomination for a Primetime Emmy® Award for Outstanding Period Costume Design for his work on Angelyne starring Emmy Rossum about the Hot Pink Los Angeles '80s Billboard icon. He was honored with an Academy Award® nomination as well as the Costume Designers Guild Excellence in Period Film nomination for his work on Gus Van Sant's Milk starring Sean Penn, who received the Best Actor Academy Award® for his portrayal of Harvey Milk.

In addition to his work on Milk, Danny Glicker enjoys a close partnership with Gus Van Sant for films including Restless, The Sea of Trees, and Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot starring Joaquin Phoenix, Jonah Hill, and Rooney Mara.

Additional honors include the Costume Designers Guild Excellence in Contemporary

Film Award for his work on Transamerica and was nominated for his work on Up in the Air, directed by frequent collaborator Jason Reitman, for whom he also designed the costumes for Ghostbusters Afterlife, Thank You for Smoking, Labor Day, and The Front Runner starring Hugh Jackman.

Selected highlights include Drew Goddard's Bad Times at the El Royale; HBO's Looking for director Andrew Haigh; two projects with Alan Ball: the pilot episodes of True Blood, HBO's hit vampire series, and the film Towelhead; On The Road directed by Walter Salles; and Bill Pohlad's Love & Mercy.

### **Andrew Weisblum - Editor**

Andrew Weisblum, ACE (Editor) has collaborated with Darren Aronofsky on the films mother!, Noah, The Wrestler, and Black Swan, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award® for Best Editing. His work on that film was also recognized with, among other honors, BAFTA and Eddie Award nominations, and the award for Best Film Editing from the Boston Society of Film Critics. They began working together with The Fountain, on which Mr. Weisblum served as visual effects editor.

Mr. Weisblum has also worked regularly with Wes Anderson beginning with The Darjeeling Limited. He has continued their collaboration with Fantastic Mr. Fox, Moonrise Kingdom, Isle of Dogs, and The French Dispatch, all four of which were nominated for American Cinema Editors (ACE)/Eddie Awards. Mr. Weisblum is currently co-editing two projects for Mr. Anderson: Asteroid City and The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and more.

Recently, Mr. Weisblum was nominated for an Academy Award® for Best Editing on Lin-Manuel Miranda's tick, tick... BOOM!, for which he won an American Cinema Editors (ACE)/Eddie Award.

Other films edited by Mr. Weisblum include Michael Showalter's The Eyes of Tammy Faye; James Bobin's Alice Through the Looking Glass; Zal Batmanglij's The OA and The East; Jason Reitman's Young Adult (ACE Eddie-nominated); Zoe Cassavetes' Broken English; and the pilot episode of the television series Smash (ACE Eddie-nominee), directed by Michael Mayer.

As an Assistant Editor and Visual Effects Editor for over a decade, he worked in the editorial department on such films as John Waters' A Dirty Shame and Cecil B. DeMented; Brian De Palma's Femme Fatale and Snake Eyes; Allison Anders' Grace of My Heart; Richard Linklater's The School of Rock and Rob Marshall's multi-Academy Award®-winning Chicago.

### **Rob Simonsen - Original Score**

Rob Simonsen is a singular composer, solo artist and co-founder of composer collective The Echo Society. Simonsen has paved his own musical path, and through years of education and experimentation, crafted a voice that both respects music traditions and explores new bounds.

Simonsen's ascent as a film composer began when his score for indie film *Westender* caught the attention of composer Mychael Danna. Through subsequent collaborations with Danna, Simonsen contributed additional music to features *Moneyball* and *Life of Pi*, and co-composed the score for *500 Hundred Days of Summer*. As a result, Simonsen received attention towards his own scores, prompting *The Hollywood Reporter* to list him as one of the "Composers primed to take their place on the A-list."

Since then, Simonsen has collaborated with directors Darren Aronofsky (*The Whale*), Shawn Levy (*The Adam Project*), Jason Reitman (*Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, *Tully*), Julia Hart (*Stargirl*, *Fast Color*), Greg Berlanti (*Love, Simon*), Gavin O'Connor (*The Way Back*), Bennett Miller (*Foxcatcher*), Marc Webb (*500 Days of Summer*, *Gifted*), and Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman (*Nerve*). His music has been called "perfectly calibrated" by the *New York Times*, "Sensitive" and "Sophisticated" by *Variety*, and "rich" by *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Simonsen's dedication to artistic expression extends beyond film work. Surrounding himself with a network of dedicated artists, he co-founded *The Echo Society* to connect and inspire the Los Angeles community with site-specific live and interactive audiovisual performances.

### **Mary Vernieu - Casting**

Casting Director Mary Vernieu has cast over 400 features during her career. With an eye for talent in both actors and filmmakers, she has developed and enjoyed long-standing working relationships with many acclaimed directors such as Darren Aronofsky, Craig Gillespie, David O. Russell, Rian Johnson, David Ayer, Sam Levinson, Ric Roman Waugh, Robert Rodriguez, and Oliver Stone. In 2013, Mary won an Artios Award for the casting of *Silver Linings Playbook* and has since been nominated for *A Star Is Born*, *Deadpool II*, and *Cruella*. Mary has also received Artios Awards for critically acclaimed *Euphoria*, *Quibi's FreeRayshawn*, and *Knives Out*. In 2022, Mary received two Emmy® nominations for her work on Season 2 of *Euphoria* and the lauded limited series, *Pam & Tommy*. Mary's company, *Betty Mae*, is named in a loving homage to her mother and grandmother.

### **Lindsay Graham Ahanonu - Casting**

Casting Director Lindsay Graham Ahanonu began her career as an intern with Mary Vernieu in 2005 at her reputable company *Betty Mae, Inc.* With a passion for actors and lifelong love of film, she has since had the honor of collaborating alongside Mary with enormously talented visionaries such as Darren Aronofsky, Craig Gillespie, David O. Russell, David Ayer, Ric Roman Waugh, Bradley Cooper, and *Speck + Gordon*. In 2013, Mary and Lindsay won an Artios Award for the casting of *Silver Linings Playbook* and have since been nominated together for *A Star Is Born*. In addition, she was nominated for a BAFTA in 2021 for *Promising Young Woman* and just received an Emmy® nomination for her work on the acclaimed limited series *Pam & Tommy*.





# CREDITS

## Cast

Charlie	Brendan Fraser
Ellie	Sadie Sink
Thomas	Ty Simpkins
Liz	Hong Chau
Mary	Samantha Morton
Delivery Boy	Sathya Sridharan

## Crew

Directed by	Darren Aronofsky
Written by	Samuel D. Hunter
Based on the play by	Samuel D. Hunter
Produced by	Jeremy Dawson
	Ari Handel
Executive Producers	Darren Aronofsky
	Scott Franklin
	Tyson Bidner
Director of Photography	Matthew Libatique, ASC, LPS
Production Designers	Mark Friedberg
	Robert Pyzocha
Edited by	Andrew Weisblum, ACE
Costume Designer	Danny Glicker
Music by	Rob Simonsen
Prosthetic Makeup Designer	Adrien Morot
Associate Producers	Brendan Naylor
	Jeff Robinson
	Dylan Golden
Casting by	Mary Vernieu, C.S.A.
	Lindsay Graham Ahanonu, C.S.A.