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AN ADDICTIVE QUALITY: EVAN RACHEL WOOD AND JULIA SARAH STONE ON “ALLURE”

by Matt Fagerholm

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If you want to see two performances guaranteed to rank among the year’s very best, look no further than “Allure,” the debut feature of Canadian photographers Carlos and [Jason Sanchez](#). [Evan Rachel Wood](#) stars as Laura, a lonely woman harboring severe psychological wounds. During her day job as a house cleaner, she finds herself drawn to her client’s daughter, Eva ([Julia Sarah Stone](#)), a teenager yearning to flee the clutches of her controlling mother. When Laura suggests that Eva run away from home to live with her, the girl finds this sudden proposition irresistible. Yet what initially appears to be a doorway to freedom quickly morphs into a nightmarish “sunken place.” Wood commands the screen with her ferocious intensity, while Stone brings an aching vulnerability to her character’s cruel awakening. Apart from being a master class in acting, the film is also one of the most haunting and provocative portrayals of abuse in recent memory.

Two weeks prior to “Allure”’s theatrical release in the states, Wood [delivered a courageous testimony before Congress](#) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sc419OAGwz8>), detailing her own experiences of abuse while advocating for the Sexual Assault Survivors’ Bill of Rights Act, which she believes must be passed in all fifty states. “Sometimes we are pushed down, not just by our attackers, but held there by the knowledge that there may be no safe place to go,” said Wood, illuminating the experiences of countless women who, like Eva, find themselves trapped even as potential escape beckons. Wood and Stone recently spoke separately with *RogerEbert.com* about the challenges they faced on this project, their joy of working together and the power of the film’s message. The following article edits their individual answers into one cohesive conversation.

Evan, you’ve become one of the most inspiring forces for change in the industry, in part because of your remarkably candid YouTube videos, such as the one from 2016 that you posted in honor of Pride Month. What inspired you to use this medium as a platform?

Evan Rachel Wood (ERW): At this point in my life, it feels involuntary. Sometimes I’ll just get inspired, and people in my life will tell you that when I make up my mind about something, I do it, right then. [laughs] It’s funny, when I made that video about bisexual visibility, I literally just woke up and—I think I even said it in the video—I had the urge to reach out to the LGBT community. All these thoughts were flooding into my brain about these issues that I felt like nobody was talking about. For the past decade, I’ve dedicated my life to bettering myself through self-help and learning about my own complexities so that I could become the best person I can be. I ask myself where my emotions are coming from so that I can delve deeper into what causes them. That day, I just felt that I needed to reach out immediately, so I set up the camera, started talking, and then edited it together into a cohesive video. Two days later, the Pulse nightclub shootings happened. It was a weird moment of wondering why I woke up randomly and had the urge to make this video.

Sometimes I feel like we are all connected to a source, and we are getting information from it. Some of us are afraid to say what’s on our minds or in our heads because it sounds crazy, and I usually go out on a limb and say, “Well, this might be crazy but I’m going to say it! Somebody might relate to this!” In this day and age, I think that’s really appreciated because there is such a flood of misinformation. What shocks people nowadays is when somebody is vulnerable and honest and exposes themselves in an emotional way, allowing themselves to be seen as the flawed human being that we all are. I think we deny that too often or pretend like we’re perfect or that we’re not all terrified. We’re all much more alike than we think. I like that medium of online videos because it is instant. It’s simple and easy. I can upload it, and if you need to find it, then you will. That’s just the day and age that we live in now. If you’ve got something to say, you can actually go and say it. For the most part. [laughs]

One of my favorite things that Julia said to me during our first interview (<https://indie-outlook.com/2016/09/16/julia-sarah-stone-on-weirdos-wet-bum/>) was that “a scene is just an honest interaction between people.” In the case of a film like “Allure,” is it daunting to maintain that level of honesty when you’re grappling with such disturbing subject matter?

Julia Sarah Stone (JSS): It was definitely a darker film than I have ever done before and it was a daunting story to tackle, but having Evan there was such an incredible support. She gave 110% in every single take, and she is such a generous scene partner that it was a lot easier for me to have that connection with her and to react genuinely and vulnerably. There is such depth to Evan’s performances. You can always see something going on underneath the surface. She’s just so captivating, and we have a common understanding of story that really came through even before we were on camera. We had a couple rehearsals prior to shooting, and we realized that we were very much all on the same page with Jason and Carlos. I was surprised by how evenly the balance was distributed between the directors. They are very collaborative, and I don’t recall seeing any arguments or clashing of opinions. The entire team came to the story with the same level of compassionate understanding of the characters, and our goals in telling this story were very aligned.

Was this film simultaneously challenging and therapeutic for you, Evan, in how it required you to explore the psyche of an abuser?

ERW: Everything about the role was a challenge. I was first attracted to it because I was told that the part was originally written for a man and that they gender swapped it. I had heard Jodie Foster saying that she reads scripts for men and women and if she really likes one, she'll approach the filmmakers and ask if they'll make the character a woman without changing anything else. That concept was really appealing to me. So I read it and was blown away that it was the first script and film from Carlos and Jason. The way that the subject was tackled and the viewpoint of it was different from anything I had seen. The fact that it was from a woman's perspective, who was not only the victim but also the abuser, was a new spin on the material and opened up new doors to explore different depths of abuse and the cycles of abuse, and how complicated it all is. It looked at the layers of abusive relationships and gaslighting while showing how the abused becomes the abuser.

While I think what Laura does is unforgivable, this movie gives us an understanding of why someone is that way, how a monster becomes a monster. I don't think anyone is born that way. We all start off as kids at some point, and for every person that is abused and whose life is changed and altered forever, the person who's been abusing them has already been forever altered. We all share the same earth and go through a lot of similar traumas, but we all have different coping mechanisms, and some people go the dark route. The fact that all these people start out as kids makes their ultimate fate all the more tragic. I don't think it's an excuse, and I'm not saying, "Oh, let them off the hook for what they've done," because these are adults, and we all have to make choices eventually. But that's not to say that it isn't a tragedy that somebody got to the point of not being able to be saved. They are a casualty, in a way. A piece of their humanity has been murdered. That's something we need to look at as opposed to just saying that this person is mentally ill or a monster. We need to start asking "why," and I think this movie was the "why" for me, or at least one of them.

JSS: Stories like these have always been relevant. It's great that there's more attention being placed on these stories and more awareness of the nuances that go into these kinds of situations. I'm very happy that it's now something that we can talk about, and it might not be a comfortable conversation yet, but it's very important and always has been. This film is definitely coming out at a time when the conversation is opening up a little bit. American films have always sparked a change in conversation. Now that people in Canada are seeing these subjects being discussed in the states, it's almost like it has given us permission to do it in our Canadian way.



The way Eva practices for her piano recitals tells us so much about her tense relationship with her mother. Did you have to learn how to play the piano for the film, Julia?

JSS: I learned how to look like I was playing the piano. [laughs] I had some lessons before we started, so part of it was me actually playing and the other part was me faking it. But the piano-playing aspect of the character does tie into her backstory, even through her body language. Eva comes from a home environment of constraint and expectations. It's very cold and perfectionistic. When Laura comes into her life, and gives her this affection that she hasn't ever felt before, it really makes her feel understood on a deeper level for the first time. That kind of contrast was very important because it's one of the major things that pulls Eva to Laura.

I love how the moment that Eva's mother storms out is the moment that Laura walks through the door and ultimately whisks away your character.

JSS: Yes, the exact thing that Eva thinks is freeing her is just another kind of trap.

The cinematography by Sara Mishara is so mesmerizing in how it observes the action in unbroken takes, forcing us to linger in the characters' discomfort.

ERW: I absolutely love Sara. She is so talented, as are Jason and Carlos. This is the first film they've directed and the first script they've written, but you would never know that by watching the film. It's just masterfully done, and it really echoes the influence of French cinema in its long takes and the hypnotic nature of the pace. When we were filming it, there were times I was like, "Is this going to work? We haven't done any coverage." [laughs] You haven't seen the movie edited together yet, so you're like, "Uh, are you sure we're just going to do it in aoner?" It's a testament to them as filmmakers because if you get it wrong, you're screwed because you have nothing to cut away to. You can't just edit your way around the badness. You're stuck with that one take, but that approach did make for shorter days. We'd come in and rehearse and block everything out and we all worked well together. Carlos and Jason have an amazing vision and they're also brilliant photographers, so they know a lot about how to make images look beautiful. I loved their photography because it often focused on really gritty things, and they'd find the beauty in what should be repulsive. They could photograph it and make it compelling while telling a story. So I thought, "Man, if you'd get these guys and some good actors together, you could make something really amazing."

JSS: Sara was so incredible. Everything was very planned out, and she and the directors worked very closely together, since they all have a very good eye for visuals. The long takes were very liberating and there were moments when the shot went a little bit longer than we had expected because we were just seeing what was going to happen in the moment. There was a lot of space to be reacting genuinely and to find that place of vulnerability, which is such a crucial aspect of the story.

ERW: Sara made the experience that much better because she also has wonderful ideas. One of the reasons that I love doing Canadian films is because there's more of a give and take with men and women on a film set. Whenever I've been on a set in Canada, the fact that there are women in power present doesn't even cross the dudes' minds. I'll bring it up and be like, "It's so cool that I never see you guys feeling *less than* because there's a woman that might be in a position higher than you. You never patronize them, it just feels normal." And they're like, "Yeah, it's such a foreign concept to me that a woman would be seen as anything other than a human being." Anyway, that was the vibe onset. We all felt safe. When tackling this sort of

subject matter and performing such vulnerable scenes, it really helped to have a woman's eye behind the camera. We were all looking out for each other, and we knew that she had our best interests at heart. She is also insanely talented and I want to use her for every movie I'm going to do now.



How important was it for you to build a close relationship with Julia before delving into your characters' more disturbing and intimate scenes?

ERW: Extremely important. We looked at so many girls for this role, and it had to be perfect because everything rests on their relationship. If the audience could watch their love scenes without thinking, "Oh man, this is really wrong, but I could totally see how this could happen," then it obviously wasn't going to work. Everyone knows part of my own story now, so it's clear to people that I have experience in this field as someone not unlike Julia's character. My biggest fear about the film was that it wasn't going to be believable or that I was going to be too timid as the abuser and people would be like, "Ah, I can tell that she's pulling back." I told myself, "No, you've got to be really terrifying in this role." It was important that we found somebody who was very professional, had a strong sense of self and understood the subject matter but also seemed like someone that my character could overpower and break very easily. Julia is incredibly smart, and thank god she's of age—she was 19—so that I didn't feel like a total creep. It's still not great, but people can rest assured that she is legally an adult. But she looks young, and that helped. Also, she was the best actor. She was the whole package. I'd look at her and think, "Who would ever hurt *her*? Are you serious? Of all the people?!"

Julia also got the depth of the character and could go to these dark places. I was constantly asking her if she was alright and trying to talk her through everything. Since I was raised on movie sets, it always meant so much to me when people onset would make sure that I was okay. Most of the films I've done have been dramatic or slightly controversial and dark, and everything has to be talked about and controlled. Anytime it goes past the point of being in a safe environment, where you feel like nobody is checking in on you or you're being pressured to do things you don't want to do, that's when it crosses a line. It was a priority for me to make sure that Julia and I always had the power and that we were in control. If we didn't want to do anything, we wouldn't have to and that was that. Once we set the boundaries of what we were doing, and we were all taking care of each other, then we knew that we could do this without traumatizing anybody. That was important. [pauses] I can't say the same about me. [laughs] Because this role was pretty traumatizing, but it was all part of the experience.

JSS: It was all very specific. It's so important that everyone feels safe and taken care of, and I really did feel that on the set. It sounds counterintuitive to have specific blocking when filming vulnerable scenes. You'd think that it would add some constraints, but I actually found that it made us freer because we weren't worried about what was going on and what was—or what wasn't—being shown. It was all very clear, and that sense of safety was very present onset. I was really grateful for that.

The sequence set in a swimming pool reminded me of Lindsay MacKay's great 2014 film, "Wet Bum (<https://indie-outlook.com/2016/05/23/lindsay-mackay-on-wet-bum-clear-blue/>),” in which Julia's character finds that she can escape reality for as long as she can hold her breath underwater.

JSS: There's a very interesting quality—not only cinematic, but spiritual—that water has, and there's a reason why we are fascinated by it. In the context of this film, I think that moment was really about the calm and clarity that Eva finds while underwater, as well as the feeling of physically holding your breath and what that does to your body. It's really up to interpretation and everybody has a different connection with water, but that's what I got from it. How Carlos and Jason went about shooting that scene was so beautiful.

There is a sense that when Laura acknowledges the pain from her past and speaks her truth, it brings her a step closer to being healed.

ERW: I've watched movies my entire life, but since making movies is my job and now that I have a child, I don't watch many of them anymore. I've learned that the best acting class you can have is to watch a documentary or an episode of "Intervention," because you will see people stripped down to their most vulnerable selves. You'll see these volatile people who struggle with addiction and push people away, sometimes violently. All they need to hear is a parent say that they are sorry, and you see a shift happen almost instantly. You watch this floodgate open as the person starts to crumble and break, and you realize that that's all they f—king needed. They just needed their mommy or their daddy to come to them and say, "I'm really sorry" for whatever reason. Sometimes it's very simple. People just need unconditional love and if you don't get that and you are also abused along the way in any form—physically, emotionally, it doesn't matter—the feeling you have is still the same.

It's that feeling of powerlessness, of being trapped or under somebody's control and you don't have a voice. The second that somebody validates you by giving you that voice and saying, "I'm sorry," it's like those words set you free, or at least allow you to start in the right direction. In Laura's case, her abuser had gaslit her his whole life. When someone starts in on you when you're very young and impressionable and this is the person you're looking to for guidance, and they're lying to you and manipulating you, and that's the only version of love that you know—how else will you try to connect with another person? Laura doesn't think that she's abusing Eva, especially in the beginning. She thinks that she's saving her, and she sees herself in her. But when the only version of love she knows is what she has been taught—again, it's not an excuse, but it's a reason. We made this movie so that people could realize how this sort of thing happens, and then say, "We've got to change this."



JSS: A lot of people misunderstand these kinds of relationships. There's always the question of, "Why didn't you leave if you were being abused?" We wanted to portray the complexities of the bond between these characters, and how it's not really about love. Eva is so captivated by this older woman who's giving her attention and affection and making her feel special when she really hasn't felt that before. We didn't want to depict their relationship in black and white by showing my character being abused all the time. There are so many more elements that make it a lot more complicated, especially in Eva's mind.

It's really a story about two people who are so starved of love and affection and so desperate to find it that they kind of latch onto each other in a very unhealthy way. It almost has an addictive quality for them, and I think, on some level, everyone can relate to that—clinging onto things that we know on some deeper, subconscious level aren't great for us. We have such a difficult time letting go because we feel that we need them for some reason, whether it has to do with self-worth or feeling like we belong somewhere else. That's what Eva is grappling with when she contemplates getting on the bus. She almost makes the decision to leave, but then all of the factors that keep her tied to Laura come flooding back. Oftentimes, it's in the moment of trying to let go of these toxic things that the bond feels so much stronger.

You had an equally tricky role in Amy Jo Johnson's recent comedy, "The Space Between (<https://indie-outlook.com/2017/09/01/amy-jo-johnsons-the-space-between-eases-pain-with-playfulness/>)," in which your character embraces a stranger's problems as a distraction from her own.

JSS: That was such a fun experience. It was the first time I had done a film that had so much comedy intertwined in it but was also very sad and tragic at the same time, and I think my character really embodied that. She's got this very dark side of her where she's struggling so much with her self-worth and feeling like she doesn't belong in the world. At the same time, when you talk to her, she's got this almost unquenchable life force and that kind of duality was very fun to play. And acting with Michael Cram was an absolute treat.

I am really hoping that one day I'll be able to see Charlie Kaufman's 2014 FX pilot, "How and Why," in which you play triplet teenage boys.

JSS: The show unfortunately did not get picked up and I don't think it exists anywhere, which is really tragic. Everything that Charlie writes is almost like an abstract work of art that has so many different messages and is left up to interpretation while still getting a very important point across. It was a really incredible experience to work on that pilot, and I think it was a little bit ahead of its time. It had so many unclosed doors and tangents that seemed irrelevant to the story but were going to be tied back into it somehow. The way that Charlie writes was a bit too evolved for what television was when we made the pilot.