

# HOUSTON CONFIDENTIAL



## JONATHAN CAOQUETTE *Filmmaker* BY QUIA QUERISMA

Watching his mother suffer from mental illness and endure an abusive marriage easily could have landed Jonathan Caouette on the wrong side of notoriety—or in a mental institution. Instead it landed him at the Sundance Film Festival with *Tarnation*.

At age 11, the budding filmmaker began shooting mini-movies. Inspired by an episode of *The Bionic Woman* and the play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, Caouette's Super 8 camera became the vehicle that whisked him away from his surroundings. As a character named Hilary, Caouette mimicked his mother and the turmoil in his home. Reflecting, he always knew that he wanted to do a film about his life. What Caouette didn't know is that his childhood vignettes would make the leap from his computer to 35mm film in a matter of months.

It's been a whirlwind experience for the 31-year old former Houstonian. He's lived in New York for the past seven years with his partner, his mother and his 9-year old son, Joshua. *Tarnation* made the rounds from Sundance to Cannes to the Los Angeles Film Festival, garnering rave reviews for its compelling story, innovation and composition as the first feature-length film created with iMovie software and an unheard of \$218.32 budget.

**What feelings were you trying to evoke from viewers?** I definitely wanted to make a film that would enable people all over the world and from all walks of life to empathize and understand what mental illness is really all about. I feel in my heart of hearts that the subject of mental illness, childhood sexuality and everything that my film talks about has been brushed under the carpeting and has been candy-coated in Hollywood and even in independent films. It's really just a love story—a love letter to my mother and to mothers everywhere. The fable in this movie is that no matter what has happened in your life, how dark things are, that there ultimately is hope at the end of the tunnel. No matter how cliché it sounds.

**What's next?** There are two films that I'm going to be banging out within the next year. One of them is highly experimental: I'm taking three already-produced, famous films from the '70s that utilized the same actress. They were all made consecutively in a three-year time span, and the actress in the film attained the same aesthetic, the same accent, even the same hair length. I'm going to basically take all three of those films and remix them, re-augment them into an additional two-hour film that tells a completely different story. It's definitely going to be an homage to this actress.

**Did Houston shape who you are?** I'm really glad I grew up in Texas because I don't know what the hell I would have turned out to be had I been raised in a place like New York under my circumstances. It's a bit of a rough city.

**Where would you take out-of-town visitors?** I would take them to Westbury Square—what's left of it. I'd take them to the River Oaks Theatre, show them where I endured all of the wonderful underground repertory films I used to see. I'd take them to a place called Notsuoh, which is Houston spelled backward. It's a crazy coffee shop downtown with a bunch of crazy characters. And I'd take them to my house (laughs) so they could meet my really interesting family and tell them to accept me for who I am. Love me or leave me. ■