

James Hutchison Interviews Actor Ryan Quinn Adams

Celebrate the Small Victories

Posted on April 26, 2020



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Ryan Quinn Adams is an LA based actor who commutes between Lake Tahoe, where his family lives, and Los Angeles in order to pursue his dream of becoming an actor. I first met Ryan when my play, *Death and the Psychiatrist*, was part of WordWave in Lake Tahoe back in 2016, and Ryan was cast as Randy Cooper a patient with a bundle of phobias including a fear of Thanksgiving that was the result of his pet turkey Oscar paying the ultimate price for the family feast. Ryan brought a warmth and charm to the part and we connected on Facebook and since then I’ve been following his trials and triumphs as he pursues his dream. I spoke to Ryan and we discussed his life as an actor working to break into the biz, as well as his approach to acting, and how *The Empire Strikes Back* ignited his love for story and movies.

RYAN QUINN ADAMS

Ultimately I’ve wanted to be an actor ever since I saw *Star Wars the Empire Strikes Back* with my mom and my sister when I was about five or six, and I was just enthralled with the idea of being able to use magic to navigate the world. And my mom knew one of the prop makers that worked on *Star Wars*, and we went to his shop, and he had a Darth Vader helmet. And I don’t know if it was used in the production but I’m guessing not because he gave it to me. It was a full helmet that attached from the front and back.

It was a really well-done piece of machinery, so for Halloween, I was Darth Vader and I made the circuit board. And you know, I'm five or six years old and I just had black gloves and black clothes on but for a little kid it was very imaginative and it just opened my world to how movies can really spark your imagination.

JAMES HUTCHISON

You've gone from being that six-year old kid dressed up as Darth Vader trick or treating to that guy who's trying to become a professional actor in LA. Is there any way for you to tell us a little bit about what that journey has been like for you?

RYAN

It's been long. *(Laughs)* When I was eight I did my first commercial. And I lucked out with that because we owned a resort. My grandparents built this compound in Palm Springs on two blocks where all the houses backed onto each other, and my grandparents bought the houses and removed the fences, and so it became a compound. It was for the family to use because they're big on family gatherings, and they were well to do so they had the resources to do it.

And my mom said, "Why don't we turn this into an executive retreat where people can come on their business trips." Basically, your first Airbnb, right? And so, we were living there. My mom was running this executive retreat, and JC Penney was staying there shooting their Christmas catalogue and commercials, and I was in the backyard playing. It was a great place for a kid to grow up because we had pools and there was a lot for a kid to do.

So, I was outside playing and the kid that they had hired was sick. And the producer was walking by watching me play and said, "Hey, how would you like to be in a commercial?" I didn't know what that was, so I asked my mom and she said, "Absolutely." And they put me in these nice clothes and had me play. And that was my first paid acting gig, and they paid me really well. I'm eight years old and I made more in a day than my mom made in a month. And I thought, "Wow, that's pretty cool."



But I didn't pursue it at the time because we moved a lot. We moved from Palm Springs to a little town called Eagle's Nest in New Mexico. And we were there for about four months and then we moved to Tahoe after that.

JAMES

Any memorable experiences from your time living and growing up in Lake Tahoe?

RYAN

When I was in the 11th grade Kevin Costner was filming *The Bodyguard* in Tahoe with Whitney Houston. I was VP of the drama club and our president, Stacey Wisnia, had got it in her head to get in contact with Kevin Costner and invite him to speak. And so, she figured out which hotel he was staying at, and she just wrote him a letter and stuck it under his door.

JAMES

She stuck it under his door.

RYAN

Yup, she slid it under his door. It's a small town so everybody knows everybody. And she must have known the front desk person and said, "Hey, I just want to slide this note under his door." And the note simply said, "Hey, you know, we have a drama club and we know you're shooting here. Would you mind spending a couple hours telling us about your experience?"

And he did. He showed up. And the drama club got to be out of school for the day, and he came to the theatre and we talked. He was only supposed to be there for two hours, but I think he stayed for about four. And he just answered questions and told us about his story and how he was in college and he wasn't even planning on being an actor. But he stumbled on it. He did a stage performance of, I can't remember, but it was probably one of the Arthur Miller classics and he fell in love with it.

JAMES

Kevin Costner was a big, big, star at that point in his career. For him to drop in on a local drama club and spend three or four hours there chatting and talking about his life and the business is very revealing about the type of person he must be.

RYAN

He was super generous with his time and his answers. But the big thing he was saying was if you're considering pursuing acting as a career, don't do it. He went on to explain all the trials and tribulations you go through and the likelihood of being a star or even being able to make a decent living at it at the time was really slim. Even though he was telling us not to pursue acting as a career all I heard was it is possible and it can be a rewarding life.

JAMES

I think you mentioned to me that your drama teacher also said don't become an actor.

RYAN

My high school drama teacher, K.C. Hoffman, was just out of college so she was twenty-one or twenty-two teaching people just a few years younger than herself. She gave us the freedom to explore and do the work in a playful way. But she told us how hard the business was and when I was a sophomore, we did a production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I really wanted a specific role, and I got the script ahead of the audition, and I memorized the role I wanted, and I did the work as if I had already gotten the part, and I came into the audition and I killed it. And she said, "Would you like to audition for anything else?" And I said, "Absolutely not. This is the role I want." And she said, "Really, because I don't see you in this role." And so, I didn't get cast in it, and that was my first real rejection in the business. And she did it, she said, to teach me a lesson because she knew I was starting to think about pursuing acting as a career. So, that was kind of a devastating blow to me.

So, I did pageants and plays and started picking up music instruments, and I was in a band in high school, and when I moved to LA out of high school I wanted to be an actor, but you had to have an agent to get work. There were independent films but not to the level there are now. You could do background work and get your SAG voucher because they wanted you to be SAG before you'd be repped. So, you needed work before you'd be repped, but you needed a rep to get work.

JAMES

That's a catch-22.

RYAN

It is a catch-22. I found it extremely frustrating. So, to pay the bills I ended up working in the music business. I worked for a company called Studio Instrument Rentals, and they're still around, and I'm still friends with the owner, Ken Berry.

They have a huge assortment of instruments – drums, keyboards, guitars, amps, anything you need to put on a show, even lighting setup, stages, and professional sound equipment. And I started off as a delivery guy. So, people would rent a Gibson Guitar for a studio session, and I would deliver it. And while I was there, I wanted to learn about how to do live audio mixing, how to do the lighting, how to set everything up. So, it was like a paid internship for me. I just absorbed every little bit of it I could, and within a year and a half, I was one of the production managers that would put on the productions.

I worked with a lot of up and coming bands at the time like Jessica Simpson and Matchbox Twenty. And I worked with Metallica who were pretty well known. And I got to work at venues that most people don't get to go to see. I did a lot of the parties at the Playboy Mansion and you know as a twenty-something-year-old guy I was living the dream.



But when I was in the music business I got really heavy into the drug scene and became an addict and in 2000 I got somewhat sober. I was still drinking and partying but nothing like I had been, and I met my wife Amanda, and I was actually going to move back to LA in 2001, but we found out she was pregnant, and I thought, “Well, let’s do the right thing and stay here in Tahoe and have a family.”

So, I ended up getting a job working for a cell phone company that was eventually bought out by Verizon, and I was doing really well in sales, and we’re raising our daughter Aaralyn, and then I started getting back into the drugs and my son Daylan was born in 2006. And I was in my full-blown addiction from 2006 to 2009 where we are homeless, you know, we lost our home. We lost all of our worldly possessions. The only thing I didn’t lose was my children and my wife. And we’re living in a trailer on my in-law’s property just off the hill from Tahoe in a town called Pollock Pines, and in January 2009 I end up getting clean and sober. And at the same time, I started working for UPS as a driver and making really good money, and we bought a house, and we’re living the American dream and everything is going really well.

And in the process of being in a 12 Step Program, you start to learn a lot about yourself, and you make amends to the people you’ve hurt. And that’s part of the process and the second time around doing the steps I made amends to myself, because I had put off my dreams of acting and of having a creative and fulfilled life for my addiction.

So, I said, “You know what, I want to get back into it.” And so I started doing plays at the community college in Tahoe, and I started buying digital film equipment, and in 2013 I auditioned for a film called *Precaution* and Manuel Crosby the director liked my performance, but I wasn’t right for the role, so he rewrote the script to have a part for me in the film. So, my first film credit is *Precaution* and it was because I did enough work in my audition to get the director to like me enough to write me in. And we’ve become really good friends since then, and he was a USC film student at the time.



So, I started looking for inspiration to write something myself, and I wrote a short called *Second Glance*. My son and I had gone to Denny’s to get his free Denny’s meal on his birthday and there was an older guy with a beard in a red polka dot hoop skirt with a purse to match and these big hoop earrings, and I just started thinking about this guy’s

story. And I thought maybe it's his wife's birthday and he's bringing her to dinner. So, I ended up writing *Second Glance* which is a story about this guy in a cocktail dress and he's taking his wife out for their anniversary and along the way he meets all these bigots.

And I knew a friend that owned an Italian restaurant, and he let me use the space when it was closed, and we shot this five minute short in eight hours. And everything that can go wrong on a production went wrong. The sound was terrible, so we ended up doing what's called ADR on all the dialogue which is dialogue replacement, basically. But that film went to some festivals and won some awards, and so I got really involved in the film community. And I started making more shorts and meeting other like-minded people, and I was still working at UPS. So, I'm going to rehearsals at night, and I'm shooting on the weekends and suddenly my life becomes two lives plus trying to manage having a family at the same time. And then I started driving to LA for auditions in 2016 and in 2017 I decided to start taking acting classes with Howard Fine in LA.



He was basically Uta Hagen's partner you know during the last decade of her life. So, it's loosely based on Uta's work. But that was an eye-opening experience because here I was trained to put on these characters on stage and to try to be something that you weren't instead of using yourself in everything that you are, you know, and so that was a paradigm shift and really intense, but it's much more effortless now.

JAMES

Once you got into the serious acting you realize you mine your own experiences. You mine your own life. Your natural responses.

RYAN

Right.

JAMES

That's one of the reasons acting done well, is so draining, right?

RYAN

Yeah, it's exhausting even. Even some of the simple stuff can be really challenging if you're really invested in it.

JAMES

Tell me a little bit about some of your favorite roles you've had or some of the favorite acting experiences you've had over the last few years.

RYAN

There's a movie in post-production right now where I play a guy named Vince. He wants to be the boss of this gang, but he's kind of incompetent, and he keeps screwing everything up, and he takes everything super personal.



The film's called *First Date*, and it's about a teenage kid who asks a girl out on a date, and he realizes his parents are taking the car to Vegas for the weekend, so he doesn't have a car, but he's saved up enough money to buy a car, so he goes and buys a car from a shady fellow. After he buys the car he gets wrapped up with a bunch of crazy people, cops, and criminals, including me and the gang I'm a part of, and we end up chasing this kid around. It's an action rom-com basically.

So, that was my friend Manuel that I did the movie *Precaution* with. This is his feature debut. It was a lot of fun to work with him. We shot sixty days over a year in total. We shot a lot because there was a lot of action that needed to be choreographed. And I did some stunts in the movie too. So, I got to work with a stunt coordinator so that was a lot of fun. That's one of my favourite roles to date just because of how intense I got to be as Vince.

JAMES

Who are some of the actors that you really admire and whose work you like?

RYAN

Meryl Streep, Daniel Day-Lewis, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Michael Cain, Gary Oldman, Dustin Hoffman, and Jack Nicholson. They all get lost in the work. They're so real and compelling to watch. Joaquin Phoenix was great in *Joker*. He brought a real humanity to the torment that his character was going through, and it was really compelling to watch. Tom Holland is a youngster that just blows me away. I know he has more in him, and I can't wait to watch his career continue to soar. Hugh Jackman does theatre, musicals, anti-hero movies and is an amazing, loveable, charismatic guy. Tom Hardy is one of my all-time favourites just because sometimes I'll be watching a film and I'll be a quarter of the way into it and I'll go, "Oh, my God, that's Tom Hardy." That's just amazing to me that he can find that character so deep in himself that his essence merges with it. *The Revenant*, *Dunkirk*, *Taboo*... all Tom Hardy. What attracts me to all these actors is how effortlessly they make it all look, but it takes a great deal of craft to make it look that good.

JAMES

What is it they're doing that makes it so powerful?

RYAN

If I knew that I would be right there with them. (*Laughs*) You know, a lot of times when you see a really compelling performance on screen it's because the director gave them the freedom to do that.

JAMES

So, you have a place in LA and you commute between LA and Tahoe because your family is still based in Lake Tahoe. Can you describe what your life as an actor is like?

RYAN

It's frustrating. It's fun. It's challenging. And it's a lot of work. I put a lot of work into my craft, and I read a lot of plays and screenplays, and I do a lot of scene study with Howard and my classmates.

I spend over half my time in LA. The commute is six and a half hours each way so that's challenging. I travel 1000 miles a week to follow this passion. The sacrifice of being away from my family for four days to four weeks at a time takes its toll. But they understand and the kids tell me it's inspiring to see me follow my passion. But it's hard. And when I tell this story people always ask, "Why don't you just move them to LA?" Good question. Simple answer. They don't want to live in LA. My wife has a good career in Tahoe. The last thing I want to do is rip them from their lives so I can follow this dream.



So, I usually leave on Mondays and I come home Fridays because I've learned that if I have an audition on Monday and I don't have anything for the rest of the week and I decide on Thursday to come home early as soon as I get close to Tahoe I'll get a notice that I have an audition on Friday, and I have to turn around and go back. So, if I go down on Monday I stay for the whole week, and I almost always have an audition on Monday.

But I don't wait around for the phone to ring. I never do that because it'll drive me nuts. I'm always keeping busy either in class or hiking or at a movie or hanging out with some friends. But when you do get the call it's usually an email or a text. It depends on whether it's straight from your representation or if it's through one of the casting sites. And then I'll read the breakdown. You know, this is a guy in his 40s and his wife just left him and any other details they provide and that gives me a little background. If I can I'll try to get hold of the script, or if the scripts not available from my agent or from the network I will go and read all the other character's sides to get an idea of what this show is. If it's a show I've never seen I'll try to find an episode to watch to get the tone of it. And then once I get all that and have an understanding of where this character will live in their world I'll start creating my character. Who is this guy? What's happening? And I'll just work my craft, and then, if there's time, and it's a big enough role, I'll get some side coaching from an acting coach just to make sure I'm not missing any layers.

JAMES

But that costs you money, doesn't it?

RYAN

Yeah, it can cost money. Sometimes I'll trade with people because I have directing experience and a pretty good eye for seeing what other people are doing. And then you go to the audition and depending on the audition I go through ups and downs of having lots of anxiety about auditioning to let's just go have some fun and play. And it just depends on the audition. I auditioned for a film that Meryl Streep is the star in and my scene was with Meryl Streep and Nicole Kidman and I was pretty nervous about that one. So, I'll do some meditation to try to calm things down. And then I go to the audition. And I have a ritual now where I tear up the sides and throw them away as I leave the audition. I'm not taking that with me. My work is done. And if they call me and I get the part then great, but if I don't get the part then it's Monday afternoon and I got to go to an audition and act today. That's my philosophy on that.

JAMES

You mentioned you do films and you do a little bit of writing and some directing. How do you like to work with actors on your set?

RYAN

I love working with actors. It's such a collaborative art especially when you're directing. As an actor it's collaborative too but when you're directing you're collaborating with so many people, and I love that aspect of it because you've got your cinematographer and your grips and the lighting guys and sound people and the actors and background and the art department and everybody's coming together to make this thing that you've written, and you get to see it go from the blank page to a finished product. If you're working on somebody else's script then you take this roadmap, which is the script, and you get to create something out of it. My favourite part is working with the actors and seeing what they're bringing to the table and then expanding on that because its fun to watch these characters come to life.

JAMES

What is your hope for your career?

RYAN

The generic answer would be a working actor but, you know, in truth, I would love to be on an HBO or Netflix comedy or drama as one of the series regulars. Ideally it would be a production that shoots all over the world so I get to see the world at the same time. *(Laughs)* That is my ultimate goal. How I get there is still up to the powers that be. But there's so much work out there, I have no doubt that things are going to start shifting in my career as long as I keep doing what I'm doing.

With film there are different levels and when you start out you're in the bottom level. You're doing student films and stuff pro bono just to get a reel and to get experience and maybe you're doing some background work. And then you level up to paid. Features, independent films, some non-network TV. And then you go into network TV, co-star, guest star, and maybe you're no longer doing ultra low budget features you're doing studio features or low budget features. And then you move up to recurring guest star and then series regular and doing big studio features where you're not the lead but you're doing more than a one liner on a film.

So, right now I'm levelling up from doing independent features and non-network TV to network TV. And there are some growing pains and some frustrations. Like I've been what they call pinned, which is basically between you and maybe another person after you go to call-backs. I've been pinned several times in the last few months for some pretty big things, and when you don't get it you start having this self-doubt, but I just have to keep reminding myself that even a call back is a win in this business.

JAMES

The other advantage you have is that you've lived a lot of life. I think you have way more life experience to draw upon than that kid who first went to LA at twenty. You've been knocked about. You've been bruised. You've raised a family. You mentioned your addiction and congratulations – I saw a post – where you said –

RYAN

Yeah, it's been 11 years.

JAMES

That's awesome. Congratulations.

RYAN

Thanks.

JAMES

I think that gives you a depth that you can use as an artist that wouldn't have been there when you were younger. So, let's talk about that. If you were to give a couple of tips to people, you know, thinking of diving in and doing the same kind of journey what would they be even though everybody told you not to do it?

RYAN

I do a lot of stage managing for Howard's beginning classes and I try to mentor the young people in the classes, and what I tell people is it's a marathon, not a sprint. Be prepared for the long haul. It takes time to develop craft. It takes time to develop relationships with agents, managers, casting directors, directors, everyone that you need on your side to have any kind of success. Don't look at the no's as missed opportunities

or rejection. It's not personal, so don't take it personally. If you beat yourself up for not getting the role or get bitter about not booking or not getting an agent or if you start thinking it's not fair, you won't last.

Allow yourself breaks. Take vacations. Spend time with family. Find balance. Do the things you love to do other than acting. Everybody wants an agent right away and they're so focused on the career that they're not spending enough time experiencing their life and what's happening. You need to live your life to have life experiences to bring to these characters, and if you're young and you don't have any life experience it's okay to get some.

I've made a lot of friends working on sets and being in class. Everyone says this is a cut-throat business but it's not. Actors really do champion other actors. At least the ones I choose to have in my life. I love it when my friends book work, even when we go out for the same roles. We support each other through the tough stuff and celebrate even the small victories.

Getting an audition in LA is something like a one in four-hundred chance. There are three to four thousand submissions and they only call thirty to forty of us in to audition. Then if you get a call back they're only calling four of us back, and when you book the job that means there were four thousand other people they looked at and you got it! That's kind of mind-blowing. So, we celebrate the little stuff. "I got an audition." "Hell yeah!"



Ryan Quinn Adams is a SAG/AFTRA actor based in Los Angeles California. For a complete list of credits, contact information, and acting reels check out www.ryanquinnadams.com or his IMDB Profile.

James Hutchison is a playwright who writes comedies, dramas, and mysteries. He also interviews other playwrights, actors, and directors about the business and creative aspects of theatre, film, and television.

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