

REVIEW

"Ordinary Things, Ordinary Situations Where Nobody Has to Talk... They Mean a Lot to Me."

Martin Trabalík's *What About Petey?* (*Co s Pét'ou?*, 2025)

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This touching and heartfelt documentary offers a glimpse into the extraordinary - if strained - relationship between a parent and their disabled child. Eighteen-year-old Petey lives with his father Mr. Johec and is on the severe autism spectrum. After the recent passing of his wife, Mr. Johec has been forced to quit his job and look after Petey full-time at home. Between caring for Petey and his other teenage child Vanesa, Mr. Johec must consider what is best for his son now that he has reached adulthood. He also needs to take into account how much longer his own health and well-being will allow for round-the-clock supervision of Petey and the everyday challenges it brings.

The audience is first introduced to Petey on the front porch of his family home. He wanders around his garden, silently holding his father's hand, towering at least a foot taller above him. He is wearing a white T-shirt stuffed into a pair of striped boxer shorts that sit much higher than his waistline. There is something cherub-like about this gentle giant, whose soft gaze conveys a childish innocence. It is a precious moment of peace and quiet, a calmness that is complimented by the ambient sounds of birdsong in the background. Throughout the film, the audience will experience examples of Petey's non-verbal humming and demonstrative interactions, alternating from hushed whispers to deafening screams. His bad mood can sometimes be navigated safely, but oftentimes he will lash out and become volatile.

The film's director, Martin Trabalík, has had a background as a disability support worker before embarking on documentary filmmaking. It is clear that Trabalík intends to share a very sympathetic and frank portrait of the lives of parents who care for their autistic children. The truth of the subject matter is very simple: it is a difficult relationship to have indeed. Especially for a single parent, it is a relationship that is seldom rewarded, often draining, and hard to justify to others. Whether it is searching

for financial support from the government or merely trying to maintain Petey's personal hygiene, most daily endeavors are a struggle.

In particular, not being able to understand each other – and perhaps the impossibility of ever being able to do so – is a heartbreaking reality for Mr. Johec. The frustrations with his son's erratic behavior and frequent violent outbursts leave no room for intimate, father-son moments (in the typical emotional bonding sense). Instead, Mr. Johec must settle for the fleeting physical connections they share – gently caressing each other's faces, holding hands, or simply mimicking the tune of Petey's non-verbal singing and random noises. Yet his love and care for Petey remains unconditional, rising above all the hardships that accompany a child with Petey's diagnosis. As such, the protagonist's altruism is of heroic proportions. Mr. Johec sacrifices all his time and efforts to care for Petey even knowing that he will likely never hear his son say, "I love you".

The severity of Mr. Johec's labor of love is symbolized by a sequence in which he must drive Petey to school in Prague. It is a trip they must do at least once a month, since there are no social services available in the village in which they reside. Before entering the car, Mr. Johec is filmed in the house, wrapping towels around his forearm. Once on the road, Petey becomes volatile, striking his father behind the wheel. Soon after, he grabs his father's arm and bites down hard. Mr. Johec cries out in pain and begins to weep, his tears carefully wiped away by his worried and confused son. Only seconds later, Petey acts out again, thrashing and pulling at his father's hair, leading them to pull over to safety. The sequence is illustrative of the real dangers involved in caring for Petey, as well as the exasperation Mr. Johec faces on a daily basis. The father confesses to the other disability support workers that the tears he sheds are not from the physical pain he feels, but from the powerlessness. Since Petey cannot communicate his feelings or intentions clearly, his father cannot comprehend such actions and admits he "doesn't recognize his son when he acts like that." It is a sad revelation, but an important one. Mr. Johec continues to stand by his son for better or worse and his persistence with Petey shows a strength like no other.

Another hard truth comes in a scene in the on-site therapist's office at the Nautis Institute, where Petey attends class. Disability support workers Bára and Luboš honestly report that they fear Petey and have become anxious around him. Due to his size, strength, and unpredictability, there is a look of genuine panic in their eyes when Petey's wailing (a warning signal of his imminent behavioral blow-ups) begins to rise. During one incident, Luboš breaks his arm in a physical altercation with Petey in the classroom and when being assigned students, he admits he doesn't want to be paired with him again.

Importantly, Mr. Johec's family, alongside Bára and Luboš, display an unwavering dedication to Petey. The filmmaker's inclusion of the darker side of a life committed to supporting a severely autistic child is to enlighten rather than exploit or dwell on people's limitations. The brief moments of exasperation and desperation of these caregivers are nothing in comparison to the monumental undertaking and service they

provide. Their positive intentions are never questioned, the tears and tantrums expressing a naturally human and vulnerable reaction to the tragic situation at hand. As a result, Petey's family and friends are an inspirational group of people that prove it is never easy, but when you're family, it is also not always *that* hard.