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2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION

LOVE SONGS FOR TOUGH GUYS

A FILM BY
SAMUEL BENCHETRIT

FRENCH RELEASE : SEPTEMBER 29TH

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a production A Single Man Productions

FRANÇOIS DAMIENS RAMZY BEDIA VANESSA PARADIS GUSTAVE KERVERN
JOEYSTARR BOULI LANNERS VALERIA BRUNI TEDESCHI VINCENT MACAIGNE

LOVE SONGS FOR TOUGH GUYS

A FILM BY
SAMUEL BENCHETRIT

Written by SAMUEL BENCHETRIT and GABOR RASSOV

RAPHAËLLE DOYLE CONSTANCE ROUSSEAU JULES BENCHETRIT

With the participation of BRUNO PODALYDÈS

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SYNOPSIS

Love can strike anywhere anytime. In a container in a northern port of France.
At a supermarket cash register. Behind the sliding glass door of a suburban home.
And on the stage of an amateur theater, in the heart of a sailor named Neptune,
or on the floor of a small town dancehall.



INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL BENCHETRIT

How would you describe this film?

Let's say that it's an absurd yet poetic comedy, with hard-nosed people who grow more tender, who are gripped by a tenderness that overwhelms them. I reminded the actors on set that we all have a poem within us, an hour of tenderness every day. I told them not to forget that they have a little flower inside. Mostly, they could have cared less!

This film weaves together several different stories. Which one came to you first?

I like films with interwoven narratives. The first story is that of Jésus (JoeyStarr) and Poussin, (Bouli Lanners) the pair that takes care of their boss's daughter. It makes me laugh. It's a confrontation with the intensity of youth with teenagers who are almost more violent than the adults. Then, I progressed by a process of deduction, gradually constructing the family.

The other characters came along gradually...

Yes. Jésus and Poussin have to organize a party for Jessica (Raphaëlle Doyle), the boss's daughter, because her father, Jeff (François Damiens), is no longer taking care of her since he fell in love. He no longer looks at his wife, Katia (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi), who, now ignored, spends her time watching TV. They have both put their hearts on standby.

Then there's Neptune (Ramzy Bedia), who's been around since he was a baby, having been found on a boat and adopted. Jeff has an almost fraternal relationship with this immigrant. But is Neptune really his brother? Like in *Cyrano*, there's a romantic betrayal that takes place.

Jacky (Gustave Kervern) is a bit like the family's secret factotum. Jésus and Poussin are like uncles, at home in the family, with free access to the refrigerator and the TV, Jacky's never in the house. He does all the dirty work outside, like planting an axe in the head of a guy who owes money. When I was applying for a subsidy, someone said they felt like they were reading *The Sopranos* but set in Dunkirk. Why not? It's a fantastic series about relationships.

Where do they come from, your five heroes; these half-dockers, half-thugs?

I've always liked these gangs of working types. I took inspiration from my dad's pals who worked in a factory making locks. These are guys who work on the docks. They handle merchandise, and they've known each other for a very long time. I was also inspired by my childhood friends who I met in the projects outside Paris where I lived. They were more crooks than creatives. I was the most sensitive of the group!

We watched VHS tapes together as a group, and aside from the pornos and horror flicks, there were gangster movies. When we watched *Goodfellas*, they all probably saw themselves as Henry Hill or other members of the gang, while I was looking at what was behind it all and wondering about who had come up with such a remarkable traveling shot. I was more interested in that side of things.

But they're not real criminals...

No. They can be excessively violent but most of their business is legal. I did my research and that's how it happens in ports, or the big ones at any rate, like Marseille, Le Havre, or in this case, Dunkirk. Companies pay a fee to share darses or basins where they can unload their goods. But in addition to declared goods, sometimes other things are brought through the port. This might not be drugs, but exotic animals or undeclared pinball machines, with a commission to pay. At the beginning of the film, Jeff learns this extra business has been passed on to another gang.

Did you already have the idea that some of the characters would be at a turning point in their lives? That they would find love?

Yes. The project is all about tenderness. It's becoming more and more important for me. And even on a personal level. Each time I've been hard, I've messed up and each time I've been kind, it's been a success. And yes, some of the characters fall in love, without telling each other, because that's

not the sort of thing you tell your friends. And with that love comes this hypersensitivity to art: One guy starts doing theater, almost despite himself, while another struggles to write poems in rhyming couplets, and two more who are kindly looking after a little girl start discussing spirituality. You often meet people who tell you about their parents; that their dad was a bricklayer, or a plumber, and then they say that they also wrote poems or songs. Everyone's written something at some point. But writing is very hard, and I really like that vision of François Damien in his kitchen, counting his poems.

There is a line in the film: "Shapes and colors are born from the darkness". Seeing your life changing through the discovery of art, and writing in particular, is also something that happens in adolescence.

I was lucky to have been affected by poetry and I've always loved writing. At around 13, I was in a school in the Paris suburbs, and I had this French teacher, Madame Odette Prévot, who I really loved. I have visited her my whole life, she's ancient now, and lives in an old people's home. She loved the kids from the projects. One day, she asked us to write about what we imagined our lives would be like later on. Most of the kids said things like they thought they'd be rappers, surrounded by girls, or that they'd be rich and would have a private jet. I wrote a story about a drug addict who kills his father. My teacher summoned my parents and told them she thought I had a future as a writer. And that was amazing. Later on, meeting Jean-Louis Trintignant definitively brought poetry into my life.

Love and art are cures for a solitude that often preoccupies your characters.

I am haunted by solitude and the notion of abandonment. There is more and more solitude in this world as populations grow bigger and bigger. It should be the opposite! Something's gone wrong for that to happen. Meeting other people is what brings meaning to life. While I was making



this film, I carried around a piece of paper with a quote from Jerzy Kosinski on it: "If you don't look at people, they don't exist". I like these words. They are both pessimistic and optimistic. You can decide to no longer look at people if they harm you. But as soon as you look at them, they exist.

How did the writing go?

Firstly, I worked with my usual writing partner, Gabor Rassov. We developed the characters together, told each other stories, and he brought me a great deal of freedom. At one point, I started writing alone, and I felt like I was packing a bag like a kid whose mother is telling him, "Don't forget this, don't forget that". I was very happy during the actual writing, working alongside Vanessa Paradis's father, who, sadly, is no longer with us. He was doing drawings for his decoration business. In the evening, we would ask each other if we were pleased with how our days had been.

Did you already have an idea of your actors?

Yes, the idea was to write for them, some of whom I'd already worked with, and others who I knew in real life and in whom I'd felt a touching humanity. Like François Damien, for example. We had crossed paths often. On set, he's very easy. He's an actor who knows nothing about the actor's trade. He has no method and I felt like I was watching someone shooting their first film, when in actual fact, he's constantly working.

Ramzy has this incredible physique: He's a big guy, sometimes encumbered by his body, with these broad shoulders and the lungs of a great actor, and with this fabulous imagination that never slips into vulgarity. He's a very romantic character; more romantic than a blue-eyed hunk. Together, Jeff and Neptune are like the chief and his faithful lieutenant, but it's also a little more complicated than that. Jeff inherited the business from his father and he's almost a prisoner to that relationship. And perhaps there's a latent rivalry in there, too, because Neptune was also the son of his father...

JoeyStarr and Bouli Lanners make a really funny couple...

Jésus, played by JoeyStarr, is kind of like a Tarantino character. I like his cool-guy thing; he's the kind of guy who likes to make things right. And it's always fun to play the opposite, although that's not really the case here because JoeyStarr, like all those actors and musicians who've aged a little, has grown wiser. He's softer than people think. And in that duo, you also have Poussin, played by Bouli Lanners, who is a psychopath: He walks around with a plastic bag with which to suffocate people.

I like the affection they both have for Jessica. I saw that in rich and famous families where they hand their kids over to the bodyguard who becomes like a substitute father. Jeff doesn't have time for his daughter. My editor, Clémence Diard, who came on the shoot, suggested I capture a moment of complicity between father and daughter. So, I shot Jeff looking at her from the kitchen when she's with Rudy, and he smiles. Rudy is played by Jules, my son. He's a little con-artist. He makes Jésus laugh and he's almost part of the family.

Another unexpected couple is that of Gustave Kervern and Vanessa Paradis. They have some real moments of comedy gold within the drama.

Yes. Gustave was willing to learn about musicals and he made me laugh a lot. I even shot a scene that I had to cut where Vanessa and he are tap-dancing, exchanging aphorisms from Sartre and Beauvoir. Jacky falls in love with Suzanne as soon as she performs in front of him.

We shot the musical scenes at the end, and it was great fun. I wrote the words and the music, and we rehearsed with a troupe made up of friends. I wanted a director to play the director and Bruno Podalydès is a formidable actor who has that skill of not taking himself too seriously, whilst being very serious.

How did Vanessa Paradis get into this unusual character?

Vanessa was a little afraid of stuttering, but I've known for a long time that she's got great comedic potential. She has this amazing vivacity and a very strong connection with the audience. It was fun to have her sing a little less well. In the studio she was, of course, absolutely perfect. So, I decided to record nothing and to shoot the musical live. And I was impressed by her performance. That's what I like about her; she's always a little "fatale". Some girls are like that, and others not, but anyone can have it, even Suzanne, the former hairdresser from the suburbs of Dunkirk, who stutters and plays Simone de Beauvoir. And that's who Kervern falls in love with.

There's also that funny moment with the character played by Vincent Macaigne...

It was no longer in the script, and I thought about coming back to it. I'd read a book by Richard Brautigan with a similar construction; a parallel history that is reflected several times during the main story. And in the end, my editor and I decided to put it all together in this one story that explores the slightly absurd possibility of a change of life. I was pleased to be working with Vincent Macaigne again after Chien.

Valeria Bruni Tedeschi has little dialog, but her presence is strong...

As I write a film, I tend to cut a lot out. And I usually have a final session before shooting, when I lose a third of the dialogue. Valeria brings this incredible emotion without words, until her very emotional tirade when her husband asks her what she sees when she closes her eyes. She's fantastic, even in that very simple shot at the hairdressers. I thought of what my mother used to say to me; that in the projects, there are no shrinks. The shrinks are the clinics and the hairdressers. Katia is a very important character because she was able to revive her relationship. And I find that same wonderful economy of words in Constance Rousseau

as the cashier with whom Jeff has fallen in love. She is an actress whose delicacy I have appreciated since her first film, *Tout est pardonné*, by Mia Hansen-Løve. I was very excited about shooting the scene where Jeff finally meets her. I like to film people against a brick wall when their truth comes out. Damiens gets out of his car, we hear Arno singing, and there's the weight of Ramzy off-camera. Damiens admits he didn't write the last poem, and she simply says, "I know". She loves the other one, her Cyrano...

How was the shoot?

Everyone was very professional and they soon all became friends, very united and very funny together. There was no room for being sensitive around them. I wanted to start with the scene on the quayside. It was a traveling shot that suited me because it was very tight. And it was fun to see them together. They are powerful figures and there was a ton of them in that shot. But we had it in the can very quickly because they are amazing actors.

Why Dunkirk, rather than another French port?

I have an attraction for the north. My mom is from the North of France, and I feel good there. Dunkirk is a slightly forgotten place, and its inhabitants are struggling to get over their lost industry. They have huge hearts: People cried when my actors left. You can't shoot in a place like that without having local people participate. The dockers are real dockers. And all of that lit by Pierre Aim, my DP, who has this talent of making the magnificent out of the everyday. He pushes certain lights – cold lights in this instance – so as to transcend the landscape. And he has this amazing relationship with the cast. Give him a woman sitting on a couch and he'll turn it into a portrait of everyday life. Moreover, there is something else about the north that connects everyone – Gustave Kervern, Bouli Lanners, and me, but also Benoît Delépine and Albert Dupontel: We all love Aki Kaurismäki's films. He influenced me greatly and I don't hide that.

The soundtrack alternates the poetic piano of Gonzales and French pop hits...

I listened to Gonzales' solo piano pieces while I was writing the film. I like them a lot – I think there is something classic and very contemporary about them, with some very powerful emotion. I talked about it with my editor who started putting the movie together without me, while we were shooting. Quite naturally, she used some pieces by Gonzales in it and they worked well. But I also wanted there to be some love songs in it. The song choices came about pretty quickly during editing. I suppose that Ramzy must listen to a radio station like Nostalgie or something like that. I chose standards. I wanted some Bashung and Arno; stuff like that. Love songs that make you sad or happy, depending on the state of mind you're in when you listen to them.

How should one understand the title?

[In French, the title is *Cette musique ne joue pour personne*, which translates literally as, "This music is playing for nobody".] It's a phrase that I wrote a few years ago. I was in a restaurant with a girl. She was getting bored, and I was getting bored. I went to the bathroom and music was playing there, Schubert's Impromptus. I thought to myself, "I'd be better off in here; this music is playing for nobody." But now, it's almost an antiphrasis: Jeff explains that for the music to exist, you just need to have loved it...





CAST

FRANÇOIS DAMIENS

RAMZY BEDIA

VANESSA PARADIS

GUSTAVE KERVERN

JOEYSTARR

BOULI LANNERS

VALERIA BRUNI TEDESCHI

VINCENT MACAIGNE

RAPHAËLLE DOYLE

CONSTANCE ROUSSEAU

JULES BENCHETRIT

BRUNO PODALYDÈS



CREW

Directed by
Writers
Photography director
Editing
Producer
Co-producers
Associated producers
A coproduction

Samuel Benchetrit
Samuel Benchetrit and Gabor Rassov
Pierre Aïm, AFC
Clémence Diard
Julien Madon
Joseph Rouschop and Jean-Yves Roubin
Arlette Zylberberg, Tanguy Dekeyser, Philippe Logie
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