

**THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER**

A FILM BY OLIVIER BABINET

[illegible]



FARO & KIDAM  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH ANOMALIE FILMS, CARNIBIRD & MATHEMATIC  
PRESENT

AÏSSATOU DIA MARIYAMA DIALLO ABOU FOFANA NAZARIO GIORDANO  
ASTAN GONLE SALIMATA GONLE NAÏLA HANAFI AARON N'KIAMBI  
RÉGIS MARVIN MERVEILLE N'KISSI MOGGZI PAUL TURGOT ELVIS ZANNOU



# SWAGGER

A FILM BY OLIVIER BABINET

France - 2016 - 84'

**NATIONAL RELEASE**  
**16th of NOVEMBER 2016**

Photos, teasers and press kit downloadables on  
**[www.swagger-le-film.com](http://www.swagger-le-film.com)**

## **FRENCH DISTRIBUTOR**

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# SYNOPSIS

*Swagger* takes us into the heads of eleven children and adolescents with surprising personalities growing up in the heart of the poorest housing estates of France. The film makes us see the world through their very personal and unexpected perspectives, their funny and incisive thoughts. By unravelling a mosaic of characters and blending different genres, including musical film and science fiction, *Swagger* gives life to the words and fantasies of these children from Aulnay and Sevrans. Despite their difficult lives, they have dreams and ambition: nobody can take that away from them.



# SWAGGER

SWAGGER (verb): Prance – Parade – Stride  
Strut – Act confidently – Walk proudly.

« What hempen homespuns have we **swaggering** here,  
So near the cradle of the fairy queen? »

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

«When I arrived in Aulnay, the kids there kept using the word “swag”. Then, a year later, when I asked Régis to tell me about “swag”, he looked at me condescendingly: “‘Swag’ is out... Now we say ‘swagance’, ‘swagologist’...” I felt a little sheepish so I looked up the origin of the word. I read that it comes from “swagger”, the first written record of which can be found in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*! “What hempen homespuns have we swaggering here so near the cradle of the fairy queen?” In the 50s, it was used to talk about Sinatra: it referred to a bad boy’s classiness. The word re-emerged in Black American ghettos in the 90s before being used in Aulnay. It has regularly come back in fashion since the 16th century. I thought it was a good title for my film because my main characters have this stylish way of being in the world. They all have an attitude and things they want to defend: despite the hardships, the kids of Aulnay keep their heads up high. Because they have “swag”. The striking contrast between this vital energy, this pride thrown in the face of the world, and the harshness of their environment is what really moved me during the years I spent in the Claude Debussy school. This experience fed into the making of *Swagger*, a film that doesn’t describe poor suburbs but rather makes us see the world through the eyes of their children.»

OLIVIER BABINET



# OLIVIER BABINET

## HOW DID SWAGGER COME ABOUT?

I first directed a short film, *C'est plutôt genre Johnny Walker*, which received funding from Cinémas 93, an association from the Seine-Saint-Denis département that helps finance films. They invited me to show the short in prison, and then to school students in the town of Saint-Denis. That's how I met Sarah Logereau, a French teacher at the Claude Debussy school in Aulnay-sous-Bois. It all began thanks to her. She asked me to run a workshop with a third form class. I worked with these students on the fantastical aspect of daily life. I asked them to describe how they got to school in the morning, and then their dreams and nightmares. We mixed all of this together to make a series of short films. One thing leading to another, the following year I was asked to come to the school one day per week, within the context of the artist-in-residence programme *In Situ*, via the Seine-Saint-Denis département council.

*In Situ* asks artists to “radiate”, in their own institutional terms, that is to try to have an impact on the whole school. So in order to “radiate”, the day I arrived, I took control over the school bells. I replaced them with music by Bernard Herrmann, Cypress Hill, Tyler The Creator, Michel Legrand and Game Boy sounds. Once the element of surprise was gone, the students began to dance in classes, in the hallways, in the playground. This made the first days of school slightly surreal and allowed all the students to know who I was.

Over the course of that year, I developed relationships with the children and teachers, the caretaker, the supervisors... I would sit with the dunces in the dining hall, and the kitchen staff gave me second helpings of potatoes. Students came to see me. I observed them. I witnessed many powerful scenes of daily school life.



# INTERVIEW

After these two years in Aulnay, I wanted to translate the daily life of this place into images through a music video in which I offered all the people who attended the school to take part. It was a video to the music of Jean-Benoît Dunkel's band, Tomorrow's World.

The result was so powerful that I felt like going further and making a film about and with these children that would be rooted in the necessity to change the way we look at them, and of which they would be the starting point. Many films on poor suburbs cast a condescending eye on them.

## HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THIS STRUCTURE WHERE EVERYDAY LIFE, INTERVIEWS, SCIENCE FICTION, AND MUSICAL MOMENTS INTERTWINE?

The heart of the film had to be the voice of the children, so I started by conducting a series of lengthy interviews with a dozen children. Then, in order to structure the film, I wrote a script that described a day in the life of my characters, events inspired by their everyday experience, to which I added details taken from the interviews or from what I had witnessed during the years I spent in Aulnay. For instance, I really did see Indian cricket players and a bucolic Luncheon-on-the-Grass-style scene in Aulnay. On the other hand, I drew desires and fantasies from the interviews and staged them, either with them as in the case of Paul's musical, or by interpreting their visions as I did in the sequence with futuristic drones.

## HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS?

My choice was the result of a process that extended over several years. Some of the kids were my "students". Others were introduced to me by teachers. Others yet came to sit next to me in the playground one day, and we struck up a conversation. This is what happened with Aissatou, for instance. She would ask questions about everything and anything. But one very important thing about the casting process was that I took everyone! Everyone who wanted to participate found a place in the film. Among all of these kids, many did not want to be interviewed. Maud Mathery, my first AD, and I, along with production managers and trainees, spent weeks going there and coming back again to make follow-up visits to the children, retrieve agreements from their parents... These parents often didn't speak French and couldn't write... It was a lot of work. Joyful and exciting work, however. I then met the families of my main characters, we went into the housing estates... Again, that was thanks to the kids.



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## DID YOU GIVE THEM THE QUESTIONS IN ADVANCE? WERE THEY PREPARED?

I didn't tell them what I would ask them in advance and everyone was asked the same questions.

So they had to agree to be included in the film without knowing what to expect beforehand.

## WHAT WERE YOUR PRINCIPLES IN TERMS OF DIRECTING?

The phrase that comes to my mind is: I used all available means. What I mean is that everything always started with the kids' energy, their imagination, their references, and also their environment, the school, the housing estates, the wasteland... Still shots, tracking shots, aerial shots, Steadicam shots, slow motion... I allowed myself to use all of that, and adapted my directing so as to always keep the fire burning. With my previous film, *Robert Mitchum Is Dead*, I wanted to somehow show my ability in independent filmmaking. We had a method, and a number of references haunted the film. For *Swagger*, however, we had no dogma. My cinematographer, Timo Salminen, doesn't speak a word of French. It was nice having a virgin eye cast on this environment. That was what I was looking for: to see everything as if for the first time. My directing consisted in filming the protagonists like film heroes, because to me they are heroes.



## LISTENING TO THEM MAKES ONE FEEL THAT A REVERSAL IS TAKING PLACE: THE "POOR SUBURBS" ARE TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE "OF FRENCH STOCK" AND ABOUT PARIS.

When I went there, I was struck by the fact that there were no white people – except among the teaching staff. It was the first thing I noticed, so I wanted to see what they thought about that, how they experienced it. A shifting occurs from the word "French" to the word "White" because for them and in what they say, they're one and the same thing. There were multiple reactions: Astan telling me that they can't live with French people really is a



# INTERVIEW

big problem. At the same time, what they said ended up being more subtle, sometimes contradictory, and even Astan ended up saying that she couldn't have a French friend but that she felt French...

## THE EMERGENCE OF FICTION ALLOWS TO BREAK OUT OF SOCIOLOGICAL STEREOTYPES.

It does. At the same time, I really wanted to go out in the field, observe, experience life at the school so that I would have a fair vision of it, not a fantasized one. I also worked with Isabelle Devinck, who edits the films of Pierre Salvadori and is mainly a comedy editor. She really worked on the film as if it were a "calling". She would never stop editing, neither at weekends, nor on Christmas Eve. It was very intense work for her. I wanted to treat the audience to a real show. I wanted the film to be funny, so finding the right rhythm for the film and the editing was important to me. But on the other hand, I didn't want to lose sight of reality.



## THE CHARACTERS ARE NOT PRESENTED AS VICTIMS (AS THEY ARE IN SOME FILMS OR TELEVISION REPORTS).

Despite the harshness of their daily lives and what they sometimes have to endure, it was absolutely necessary to avoid feeling sorry for them and to allow them to make themselves heard in a different way, by taking the time to listen. One day, I came across a news channel report on the Debussy school: it showed the school gate from a distance and three guys with their hoods on to the sound of an eerie synthesizer... And then a map of France with red patches indicating no-go areas. My political statement is to go through the gate and meet the people under the hoods. The film's commitment is to let the children speak and get acquainted with individuals. Not an imaginary population who is given catch-all names that ooze fear and prejudice ("racaille", "wesh"). I wanted to focus on the point of view of the children so as to give an account of who they are. There were adults in the film. Some of the teachers had a lot more scenes, but in the end we cut out many of

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them so that we would really stay glued to the children. For instance, when Naïla talks about architecture, I think that she sets the whole film in context. There is no need for an expert's take on it, whether an architect or an urban planner. What she says is more than enough.

## DID YOU HAVE TO DIRECT THEM MUCH?

The great thing was that they forgot that the camera was there very quickly. However, having to deal with so many students was exhausting sometimes. The scene with Régis and his fur coat involved eighty over-excited, yelling kids. At other times, they're bored or exhausted, and you need to take that mood into account. But on the whole, it was more like *Zero for Conduct*: we were in a school where there were no restrictions. It was just us and them, we had the keys, and we could do anything we wanted. I think that this aspect was great for them: they would go to school, but not to study. The weather was nice, there were boys and girls... They were their best memories!

## HAVE THEY SEEN THE FILM?

Yes. The first time, some of them hid their eyes every time they were on screen! Since then, they have told me that they love the film more every time they see it. They're not ashamed. They recognize themselves in it. They also realise how much they have changed since then. Aaron, the small boy who liked football more than girls, is now 6.2 feet... and he is very interested in girls! The first time they saw the film, they laughed a lot, but nobody made fun of other characters, particularly not when students confessed intimate things. Deep down, they form a community: the community of those who agreed to take part in the film. They stand together even if they don't all know each other. They are all very proud and I sometimes have to bring them back to the real world when they see that they are credited as actors on IMDB. The parents who saw the film also liked it a lot. Abou's father said: "That's us. That's our town," which is very important to me.

BY MURIELLE JOUDET



# BIOGRAPHY



Olivier Babinet was born in Strasbourg. He was introduced to the public with the TV series *Le Bidule*, which was broadcast on Canal+ in 1999.

In 2008, he directed his first short film, *C'est plutôt genre Johnny Walker*. The film won many awards in festivals, including the Special Jury Prize at Clermont-Ferrand. His first feature film, *Robert Mitchum Is Dead*, co-directed with photographer Fred Kihn, was screened at the 63rd

Cannes film festival in the ACID selection. The film won the Grand Prize at Premiers Plans Festival in Angers and was nominated for Best First Film at London Festival Raindance. In parallel to his activities as a screenwriter and director, Olivier Babinet worked with Aulnay-sous-Bois school students for two years, in a neighbourhood where 50% of families live below the poverty line. This collaboration resulted in these teenagers making eight fantasy and science fiction short films. The idea of making a documentary film about them gradually emerged from these encounters. Babinet was immersed with them for a total of four years. *Swagger* was presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, in the ACID selection. Olivier Babinet is part of the artist collective "We are Familia" and has directed many music videos (for Cheveu, Zombie Zombie, Tomorrow's World, Rita Mitsouko, Mathieu Boggaerts, etc.) He also contributes to New York magazine "Chalet", in which his semi-imaginary journal, "Desire & Disillusion", is published as a series.



# STUDENTS FROM CLAUDE DEBUSSY



*« Talking to other people made me optimistic. »*



*« If I could relive my childhood, I'd try to speak more loudly, to talk more, to be less discreet. »*



*« Being in love, I don't know. If you don't experience that once in your life, it's like... you've done nothing. »*



*« I was more bored in church than at the mosque. »*



*« I know no one who is of French stock. What's French stock? »*



*« ...her boyfriend got her gyros. Five-euro gyros. That's disrespectful. It's not romantic. »*



# SCHOOL IN AULNAY-SOUS-BOIS



## SWAGGER

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7

7 NAÏLA HANAFI

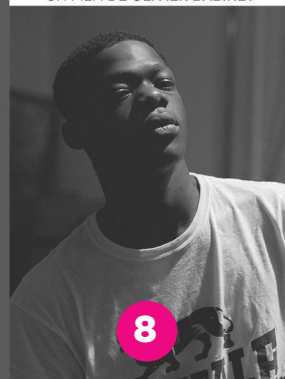
WWW.SWAGGER-LE-FILM.COM

« I remember there's a photo of me with Mickey Mouse! I'd like to burn that photo. »



## SWAGGER

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8

8 AARON JR. N'KIAMBI

WWW.SWAGGER-LE-FILM.COM

« In politics, you never get what you expect. That's why it doesn't interest me. »



## SWAGGER

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9

9 RÉGIS N'KISSI

WWW.SWAGGER-LE-FILM.COM

« I'm popular, but I'm not Beyoncé. People appreciate me. I'll put it that way. »



## SWAGGER

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10

10 PAUL TURGOT

WWW.SWAGGER-LE-FILM.COM

« The most important thing to me is to go to Heaven. Golden Heaven. Silver. God, Jesus, all that. »



## SWAGGER

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11

11 ELVIS ZANNOU

WWW.SWAGGER-LE-FILM.COM

« When I was 12, I came here, to France, to go to school and live with my parents. My happiest memory is coming here. »

# CREW

## EDITING: ISABELLE DEVINCK

Isabelle Devinck has edited films for Pierre Salvadori, Julie Delpy and Philippe Claudel. She began her career as the editor of Roger Planchon's films. In 2008, she collaborated with Olivier Babinet for the first time, working on his short film *C'est plutôt genre Johnny Walker*.

## CINEMATOGRAPHY: TIMO SALMINEN

Timo Salminen is a Finnish cinematographer. He was noticed for working on some of Aki Kaurismäki's films, which owed him five Jussi Awards (the most prestigious awards in Finland) and two nominations for the European Film Awards. He was the DOP on *The Man Without a Past*, which got the Grand Prix in Cannes in 2002, and *Le Havre*, nominated for the Best Director César in 2012. More recently, he worked on Lisandro Alonso's *Jauja*. He first worked with Olivier Babinet in 2010 on *Robert Mitchum Is Dead*. This was the beginning of a happy collaboration.

## MUSIC: JEAN-BENOIT DUNCKEL

Jean-Benoît Dunckel is a French musician and composer, a founding member of Air alongside Nicolas Godin. Together, they wrote the scores of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation* for Sofia Coppola and the restored version of Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon*.

He then started several other bands - Tomorrow's World, Starwalker, Darkel - and composed soundtracks for films by Mathieu Demy and Jacques Perconte. He met Olivier Babinet while working on the music video of "Life on Earth" by his band Tomorrow's World, which was shot with children from the Claude Debussy school in Aulnay-sous-Bois.



# TECHNICAL LIST

Director: Olivier Babinet  
Editor: Isabelle Devinck  
Cinematographer: Timo Salminen  
Music: Jean-Benoît Dunckel  
Sound editor: Valérie Deloof

Production:  
Executive producers:  
Marine Dorfmann / Faro  
Alexandre Perrier / Kidam

Co-producers:  
Anomalie Films : Jean-Luc Bergeron / Jean Ozannat / Didier Barcelo  
Carnibird : Sam Fontaine  
Mathematic : Guillaume Marien

French distributor:  
Rezo Films

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