

Versus production & Mact Productions present

Jonas Bloquet Jonathan Zaccàï Yannick Renier

Private Lessons

A film by Joachim Lafosse

CANNES 2008
4th
Quinzaine
des Réalisateurs
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT



Versus production et Mact Productions present

JONAS BLOQUET - JONATHAN ZACCAÏ - YANNICK RENIER

Private Lessons

(Elève Libre)

a film by JOACHIM LAFOSSE

BELGIUM / France - 2008 - COLOR - 105 min - 35mm - Scope



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SYNOPSIS

Jonas, a teenager who is doing badly at school, meets Pierre, a man in his thirties, who is moved by his situation and takes him under his wing. On the strength of this special bond, Jonas drops out of school. Incapable of setting limits on their relationship, the cost of continuing his education keeps rising for Jonas.

Can you learn when you are breaking the rules?

Interview with Joachim Lafosse



Through the couple formed by Pierre and Jonas in Private Lessons, you explore the line dividing transmission and intrusion...

Yes, absolutely. One of the starting points was getting people to think about the distinction between transmission and intrusion. What makes a situation swing one way or another? At what point in Jonas' education is there a shift from transmission to transgression? Jonas is a teenager full of curiosity. He wants to find out about a whole lot of things. He meets adults who make him believe they have answers to his questions. Like any neurotic person up against shortcomings and suffering, Jonas wants a guide and Pierre takes on that very role. He acts like a guardian of knowledge with Jonas : " You have questions about your sexual identity, about love ? I'll give you access to all the answers."

We can compare him with a voter who wants to improve his everyday life and meets a politician who says to him : " I'll save your life and make you happy. Your happiness will come from the buying power I'll give you."

Pierre is even more perverse than that. He makes Jonas believe he is thinking for himself...

Yes, he says to him : " You know, at your age, I was less curious and I knew less than you. You're developing nicely and you're very mature." For me, this is the height of perversion : taking away somebody's free will by making him believe he is doing what he wants.

It is always by complimenting people that we seduce them. I'd like the film to make the viewer wonder whether the situation is perverse or not. What is perversion ? I think the word " perversion " is overused. The pervert only exists in his relationship with his victim. He has to find someone who agrees to play his game. We can choose not to participate in a perverse relationship, not to vote for bad people, not to be exploited by a boss, to defend our values and behavior that allow each of us to set



ourselves free. The film's title comes from this : Elève libre, literally " free student. " Being an adult means being able to say no. But you must have been taught the importance of identifying limits so you can set limits yourself. This question of limits is at the heart of the thinking of psychoanalyst André Green, whose work I like a lot.

Exploring the line between transmission and perversion seems especially relevant at a time when we are assessing the consequences of May 1968 and what this generation passed down... or didn't.

The issue of transmission is crucial for everyone in every era. It is the most fertile question in life : what will we leave behind and how ? Maybe this revolution that wanted to stop saying no ended up making us want structure and focused our attention on this issue. I am a child of 1968 revolutionaries, of parents who didn't want to exercise authority, who wanted to be friends with their children and for their kids to call them by their first names...

" Say no to saying no : enjoy unfettered pleasure. " I get the feeling that this refusal of limits was what consumer society and advertising strategies were built on. Pierre says to Jonas : " Follow in my footsteps and you'll see, you'll be fulfilled. " But it is an illusion to think the answer is in buying power, the ability to buy whenever you want, to have the sexuality you want, to separate sexuality from emotions and to think only of the body. And making people believe that is an attempt to make them lose their souls and their integrity.

Even if his behavior is vile, we never feel disgust for Pierre. He makes us want to question the monstrous situation between him and Jonas rather than condemn him directly as a person...

I think Pierre is a victim of himself. He suffers from his inability to express his desire. He only has ideas. When Jonas tells him it's no big deal to be a fag, I think we're at the heart of the problem. Pierre has never dared say he is attracted to men and he hides behind the theory of bisexuality, which is all about wanting to be everything, wanting to control everything, wanting to seduce everyone and having everyone as an option. It means refusing to choose, to define oneself and in a way, to exist.



Perhaps to a lesser extent, Didier and Nathalie also set up a perverse relationship.

I get the feeling they too are manipulated by Pierre. And they have a theory : freedom is doing what you want and not imposing anything. They think this theory allows them to love without suffering, to bond without hurting but in the end, we find out its more complicated than that and there is maybe something more important than freedom : desire. Even if one is not possible without the other.

In the film, there are not really any positive adult characters who know how to hand down knowledge...

Jonas' parents are negligent in some ways but they do what they can. Maybe I went a little overboard in the image given to the adults so we ask what being an adult means. It is not a question of being old enough. What makes us adults ? I think it's an important question. If all children are polymorphous pervers, the real pervers are adults who have remained children. This means it is necessary to hand down knowledge to allow children to grow up.

Delphine does not try to get ahead of what she should know at her age but ultimately she is the most adult, the most mature...

She is the only one capable of saying no. She doesn't have the words but she walks away from the meal. Pauline is caught up in desire for Jonas. She is discovering new things. She is a strong character, a real counterpoint who lets the film breathe. She is mysterious in that she offers Jonas a real relationship. There is pleasure because it does not go smoothly, because they are trying to find each other and because they can say no. This is what Jonas can't stand. He prefers Pierre.

When Jonas' movements have no feeling behind them but are fed by what the adults have "taught" him, Delphine feels it and the viewer does too...

The relationship between Jonas and Delphine was about discovery but it becomes mechanical. It is where he checks his ability to give someone an orgasm, to perform, as instructed by porn flicks. Today, there is the notion that pornography is a necessary evil that educates us.



People suffer at not performing up to par but it is the enigma that counts, not the performance. I wanted to film something watchable without it making you feel dirty, without viewers feeling like they had joined in and got off on a degrading spectacle. I didn't want to use the tools of perversion that I was criticizing to appeal to the audience. So I had to think about what I was showing and what stayed off-screen. I wanted to almost take viewers inside the characters.

To do this, I focused on faces. I wanted to show that sexual pleasure is mental, not a physical mechanism that can be timed. The adults that surround Jonas separate body and mind in the name of orgasms. I wanted the image to take us back to the spirit.

It is the first time you've filmed in scope...

And it won't be the last! I loved it. I wanted this wide screen to show how people are all mixed together. Scope allows you to film at least three characters at the same time, in the same frame, with no difficulty. People always say scope is made for big landscapes. But not only.

The meal scenes were already very present in Nue Propriété...

Psychology in films bores me. But I like defining a character. And there is no more efficient way of doing this than by showing how he eats. Show me how you eat and I'll tell you who you are! There is nothing more sexual than eating. Pierre is everything for Jonas: a teacher-father and a foster mother who feeds him. This very maternal, encompassing and enveloping side is manifested in the meals.

How did you find Jonas?

I used to play a lot of tennis and Jonas is my ex-coach's son. I hadn't seen him since he was a kid but when he showed up at the casting call, I recognized him and he was the best. For child or teen actors, I always say the casting call should be for the parents! You have to understand what motivates the child or teenager, whether it's really him who wants to act, what the parents are like with him, how they look at him... It is not easy to give a screenplay like mine to parents, to tell them their child will act in scenes of fellatio and sodomy...

I told Jonas' parents how I was going to film and I trusted them because



I knew them well and knew they give him points of reference. Like his character, Jonas once wanted to be a champion and had experienced the disillusion that can bring. He had never acted for the cinema before and in my film, he is in every shot !

What about Jonathan Zaccaï ?

I spent an evening with him when I was looking for my character. We hit it off. He seduced me by pretending he didn't know I was a filmmaker ! More seriously, I wanted Pierre's character to be neutral, someone we would want to be friends with, someone who is not immediately seen as a transgressor. Jonathan didn't necessarily realize it but I wanted to give the feeling that his body no longer exists ! And we dressed him to look banal, always with the same suit.

And Yannick Rénier ?

He seemed perfect to play Pierre's sidekick, the guy who pushes people to go through with things. And since I wanted us to feel a lack of inhibition between Didier and his girlfriend, I offered the role of Nathalie to Claire Bodson, Yannick's girlfriend, who is also an actress. I had seen her in theater and I really like her work. Likewise for Anne Coessens, who plays Jonas' mother. As for Pauline Etienne (Delphine), like Jonas, she had never acted before. I met her at the casting call. I liked her tomboy side. She is radiant and at the same time very introspective. Introducing viewers to new actors is one of the joys of making films

Why the reference to Camus ?

I loved Camus when I was younger. It is also a way of showing that we can use the words of someone good by twisting them. In Pierre's mouth, Camus' words become terrible. This is why we have to always be on our guard.

There is also the importance of that teacher in Camus' education, which is an example of successful transmission...

When I read *The First Man*, I was very moved by the letter at the end of the book. Camus' teacher is the opposite of Pierre. He gives freely or more exactly, within limits. He gave something viable. Camus did not feel



guilty for acquiring what was given to him. I am not sure Jonas manages to fully acquire everything that was passed down to him. Is he somewhere if he is where he is thanks to Pierre ? Will Jonas have to spend his whole life paying to get where he wants to be ? Will he set limits at some point ? We can imagine that Jonas will realize that he has perhaps been exploited and he will heal by learning to say no to what is bad for him... And yes to what is right. That is the next step...

... and this is the film's conclusion. The end is very moving in the way it passes the baton to the viewer. A new future opens up for Jonas. We can't help wondering what he will do with it...

When you have experienced sexual pleasure provoked by perversion, it is hard to move away from this comfort to come back to something tougher, to accept living with hardship again. I leave the viewer with the question : how much innocence can you lose without losing everything ?

Interview by Claire Vassé

Joachim Lafosse

Joachim Lafosse was born in 1975 in Brussels. His graduate film at IAD, the Belgian cinema school, was a short film called *Tribu*, which won awards in many festivals. Scriptwriter, director, playwright and theater director, he has worked on many projects, directing his first mid-length film in 2003 : *Folie privée*, which was also awarded many prizes.

Between 2005 and 2006, he shot his first feature film, *Ça rend heureux* with Fabrizio Rongione and was already preparing for his next film.

Private Property, with Isabelle Huppert and Jérémie and Yannick Rénier playing rival twin brothers was in competition at the Venice Film Festival in 2006.

Private Lessons is his third feature film.

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| 2008 | ELEVE LIBRE (PRIVATE LESSONS) 40 ^e Quinzaine des réalisateurs – Cannes 2008 |
| 2006 | NUE PROPRIETE (PRIVATE PROPERTY) Venice Film Festival – in competition ÇA REND HEUREUX Locarno Festival – in competition |
| 2003 | FOLIE PRIVEE (medium-length film) Locarno Festival – in competition |
| 2001 | TRIBU (short film) Namur Festival – best short film prize |



CAST

| | |
|----------|-----------------|
| Jonas | Jonas Bloquet |
| Pierre | Jonathan Zaccàï |
| Didier | Yannick Renier |
| Nathalie | Claire Bodson |
| Delphine | Pauline Etienne |
| Pascale | Anne Coesens |
| Serge | Johan Leysen |



CREW

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Director | Joachim Lafosse |
| Screenplay and Dialogues | Joachim Lafosse et François Pirot |
| Cinematography | Hichame Alaouié |
| Sound Engineer | Benoît De Clerck |
| Set designer | Anna Falguères |
| Costumes | Anne-Catherine Kunz |
| Film editing | Sophie Vercruysse |
| Sound mixing | Benoît Biral |
| Set Photographer | Anne Van Aerschot |
| Production manager | Gwennaëlle Libert |
| Associate Producer | Jacques-Henri Bronckart - Versus production |
| Co-producers | Martine de Clermont Tonnerre - Mact Productions Olivier Bronckart - Inver Invest Arlette Zylberberg - RTBF (Belgian Television) Eric van Zuulen - RYVA |

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