

Nord-Ouest and Pathé Present

THE FINISHERS



**A film by Nils Tavernier,
with Jacques Gamblin, Alexandra Lamy and Fabien Héraud**

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Synopsis

Julien is 17, has a great sense of humor, bags of charm, and is wheelchair-bound due to cerebral palsy.

Despite their love for him, his family is gradually falling apart under the strain of dealing with his disability. In a bid to bond with his father, Julien challenges him to participate with him in the Ironman race in Nice (French Riviera), a triathlon in which his father has previously competed.

This trial is already exceptional, but it becomes almost impossible if one has to help a disabled youth throughout the course. Beyond the sporting exploit, this is the story of one family's exemplary combat, and a moving portrait of the love between a father and his son.

INTERVIEW WITH NILS TAVERNIER

How did the project come about?

For the past 20 years, I've been very interested in children and sickness, and I'd just spent two years at the Necker hospital in Paris in the neurology department working on a documentary. As such, I wanted to address the incredible strength of some of these kids who are different to the rest. I realized that in cases of some particularly serious illnesses, children can have this amazing vital energy that they spread around them, that they spread to me and which they spread to their own families. I didn't want extraordinary characters for my film but I didn't want them to be banal either – I wanted people who could be any of us and who reveal themselves to be exceptional thanks to the child in question.

Then I came across this video on the internet about a child with cerebral palsy who asked his dad to do an Ironman race and his dad agreed. That's the perfect example of what I'd observed, mainly in terms of that incredible strength I just mentioned. Sometimes, these dads, who can no longer stand that their kids are different, suddenly become these forces of nature thanks to the energy of their child. So I wanted to make a film in which the protagonist has a disability, but where we quickly forget the illness – we see how they are different, but as soon as we accept that difference with the energy that comes from it, we no longer see the disability. I think that is wonderful.

Was the film inspired by your relationship with your own father?

The film is mainly a father-son story but I wasn't that inspired by my relationship with my own father. However, I did draw on my relationship with my own son whom I love deeply and with whom I've done a lot of sport. For example, in the scene where Julien is being pushed along on his bike by his father, I remembered that I took my son on my motorbike when he was five. I remembered his smile in the rear-view mirror and that memory inspired a scene in the film.

Do triathlons particularly appeal to you?

I didn't know anything about them. And even if the technical aspect of this sport isn't something I'm particularly interested in, I think that it's a good allegory to talk about a father who needs to surpass himself and to really achieve something in order to prove to his son that he loves him. It's very cinematographic. When you see 3,000 guys throwing themselves into the water in the raking light of dawn, it's like looking at dolphins. In the same way, a father on the brink of exhaustion who pushes his son in a wheelchair while running is a very moving sight. Above all, this context allowed me to evoke the intimacy of two individuals lost in a big crowd – whether it's among 3,000 swimmers or on a road amidst hundreds of cyclists – who then find themselves alone again, because they aren't going as fast as the others.

What was it like working with your two co-writers?

I had the structure of the film in mind early on, and Pierre Leyssieux helped me shape it. Then I worked on refining the dialog with Laurent Bertoni for around a year. Although I felt I knew the characters very well, I got Jacques Gamblin and Alexandra Lamy involved very early on because there were elements regarding the couple that I was missing. They gave their input while we were writing the script for around four months, which enabled me to add more depth to the relationship between the couple and their child. From time to time, Jacques gave me his opinion, saying for example that some information should be only revealed within the relationship and not to anyone outside of that, and he was absolutely right. Alexandra

followed the writing closely to see if that progression of her character seemed accurate and if she could relate to the dialog between her and Jacques. I have always found it easier to write male roles, so she helped bring veracity to her character.

The striking thing is that this is a coming-of-age story for both Julien and his family...

In many families confronted with disability, I've seen the energy of change driven by the child. This is not automatic – some children find themselves in a permanent state of sadness because of their condition – but the story of the family in the film is above all that of a kid who pushes his parents to show who they really are. Through him, his parents change their fixed ideas on who they are. They surpass themselves and discover the very best in themselves. I thought it magnificent that an 18-year-old kid could so radically change his own dad's life. The father's psychological construction – fleeing and rejection – changes direction under the influence of his child. And God knows how difficult it is to change once you've defined yourself as an adult with all your prejudices. And that's what happens to the father in the film when he says, *"My wife isn't exactly who I thought she was and my son isn't anything like the idea I had of him."*

Above all, it's an uplifting film about life...

At the start of the film, the family is paralyzed, with a mother who is overinvested in her son – something that occurs relatively frequently when one has a special child – and a father who is too often absent. But very quickly, this structure comes apart and the characters reveal themselves to be poetic or funny, and they get back their taste for life. In the end, the moment of tension is pretty short. The film is funny, moving and full of hope.

One can sense the father's contained violence. How did you construct the character?

I wanted him to be caught in a vice at the beginning of the film. He goes home reluctantly because he is unemployed and he doesn't want to spend time with his son or wife, and his relationship is about to fall apart. I can relate to him. I sometimes have anger building up inside me that I can contain until it suddenly comes rushing out. For me, the father's story is one of a modern-day hero, and that's what gives the film its romantic breadth.

The film also deals with the delicate balance between the long absence of the father and the sometimes-stifling presence of the mother.

First of all, we are confronted by this mother who smothers her son and a father who is running away from his problems. Then gradually, their roles as parents are inversed. It's difficult for the mother to accept the father finding his place in their son's life because by definition, she is losing some of hers. She sees her child becoming emancipated and participating in a project with his father which takes away some of her authority. While she is happy for him, she feels a little dispossessed and sidelined. And this is the case for many mothers, including those in families who are not dealing with a disability.

Does the mother feel she has sacrificed herself for her son?

In the families I met with, many mothers whose children are not autonomous have no time for themselves. Sometimes, they have a feeling of self-sacrifice, notably when the child leaves the family home and looks after his or herself. Their lives have been so busy until that point, and now what will become of them? How to face up to this void? In the film, I find it very moving that the mother accepts losing her

authority over her son and sees him having a ball with his father while she did all the “dirty work” for 17 years. In the start, this is unforgivable for her. But gradually, she changes her mind and takes pleasure in this new relationship between father and son. Seeing him flourish, she falls in love with her husband all over again and gets involved in the race with the two men in her life. In a sense, she comes back into their lives again.

Why did you choose to set the story in the mountains?

I wanted to demonstrate the mental imprisonment of the characters in a very open space and the Alpine landscape was perfect for that. To me, the house is like a kind of jail where everyone is stifled. I filmed it using fixed shots with very little camera movement. As soon as the parents or the son need to say something important, they go outside. I found it interesting to deal with solitude and confinement in a space that is open, peaceful and arid, all at the same time. This approach enabled me to choose the locations depending on how each character is feeling. For example, when the father tells his son they are going to do the race and they are both happy, it is accompanied by a huge, magnificent green landscape. In contrast, when the father explains to Julien that he doesn't want to do the race, the mountains are dry and the peaks more prominent, even if there are a few splashes of green.

The secondary roles are very meaty: the sister, the father's friend and Julien's pal. How did you develop them?

Julien's sister was inspired by a young girl whose two brothers are very seriously disabled and whom I have known for a very long time. In spending time with that family, I found myself filming a birthday party that I wanted to transpose into the film, but I couldn't get the same level of emotion. So I asked the sister if I could use the text she had read. Her name is Sonia Jacob and we see her in the film – she plays the physical therapist who works with Julien and she's an amazing actress.

I also wanted the father to have a space of his own where he could speak freely and where he would be able to bounce off someone other than his wife or child. He needed a friend and I created one who is a real ladies' man and who spends his time chatting up the girls. He's also a long-time family friend who very cunningly manages to put ideas into the father's head. For this, I cast Xavier Mathieu, a union activist and actor, and I rewrote some of the dialog to make him feel more at ease. He has this earthy quality and a real humanity about him that I really love.

As for Julien's pal, Yohann, he is a real joker who pokes fun at people's disabilities whilst being disabled himself. He is full of life and provides a way of showing Julien through a kindly, fun-loving and intrepid perspective. They happily take the train together and try to pick up girls in bars. Pablo, who plays Yohann, isn't disabled in real life so he had to visit some hospitals and meet people who were in order to construct his character's disability. I also explained to him how epilepsy can trigger hemiplegia. The work he did on his gestures was amazing, so much so that certain disabled people were taken in. For a film that deals with people escaping their preconceived ideas, I thought that was a nice touch.

How did the idea of casting Jacques Gamblin and Alexandra Lamy as the parents come about?

Jacques had the right body and age for the character – I didn't want a 45-year-old dad – and I remembered how in *MADemoiselle*, I found his intelligence very moving. He has a real toughness in his eyes, but as soon as he smiles, his face lights up. I think he still has a real childlike quality – he has held on to that ability to marvel at things and gets a real pleasure from new discoveries. He's an actor who

doesn't mind being moved by his acting partners and that's pretty uncommon. I needed a father who could do that.

I thought Alexandra was amazing in *THE PLAYERS*, in which she had this intimacy and extreme sincerity. One is normally used to seeing her being dazzling, and this was the first time to my knowledge that she played a character that was as much about restraint as she was about truth. That's what inspired me to offer her the role of the mother.

One has the feeling that these two actors really owned their characters...

It was crazy because when I offered the part to Jacques, I didn't know that he had written a book about a father and his son coming together through sport. It was in fact the metaphor for his own relationship with his father. Moreover, when I offered the role to Alexandra, I didn't know that she had been working with a family with a sick child for a long time because she was going to make a documentary for the TV show *Envoyé Spécial* about children in hospitals suffering from serious diseases. However, I did know that Jacques was very sporty and a very keen cyclist and that he had the right physical profile for the part. He didn't want to do a double for any of his scenes, even when there were wide shots where it wouldn't have been a problem. I eventually realized why: he had been to see Fabien's family and told them, "*For your son, I owe it to myself to do it all.*" That no doubt partially came from a desire on his part to charm them, but there was definitely some truth in there. He sometime spent five hours on the go in freezing water, and he got sick after the shoot. He had a very high fever for two weeks, but he never told me. Yet he was always pushing me to go farther and to shoot really tough physical scenes without ever sparing him.

How did you find Fabien Héraud for the role of Julien?

I traveled the length and breadth of France for almost six months with five other people and we visited 170 different establishments to find the boy with a clear clinical difference. I asked the kids to send me video footage of themselves and Fabien sent me a movie that he'd made with a bunch of pals in which you see him playing around with his wheelchair. He had this disarming smile. I did a very simple camera test with him and there was this light that came off him. To me, Fabien is like a ray of sunshine. Then, we had to see whether he could portray the attitudes and emotions that he didn't feel towards his own parents, because people with cerebral palsy often find it hard to convey emotions they don't feel. He had coaching for four months and we worked hard on his pronunciation and phrasing. On the shoot, Fabien was the only one who was a unanimous hit. He rallied everyone around him, whatever their age or the social milieu of his acting partners or crew.

How did Jacques Gamblin train for the role?

Jacques did a lot of training for all three disciplines of the triathlon. We even delivered the bike to his home so he could get used to it: he needed to be able to catch his breath on the shoot. But in the end, he didn't need much recovery time after the more sporty takes, which meant we could shoot more scenes than we'd planned. Jacques didn't want to meet with any sick kids in hospital because he wanted the film to go beyond the handicap. Above all, he wanted to play a father and to work on his relationship with Fabien for whom he felt responsible. And Fabien needed to trust him completely to shoot the scenes where they are both hurtling around bends on mountain roads at 55kph!

How did shooting the Ironman contest go?

We shot the swimming and cycling scenes during the June competition. For the first day of shooting with

Fabien, he had 200 crew members, seven cameras and a chopper focusing on him. We wanted the scenes to be spectacular and my producers were totally behind me in that.

What were your priorities in terms of directing?

For the Ironman, I was keen to show the “big event” side to the race, with a directorial approach that includes effects and rapid editing, but without overdoing it. We were filming this exploit taking place in front of us so I wanted fireworks. However, for the inside of the house, I wanted a much more sober approach so when the characters are outside the house, it’s all about movement, and when they are inside, it’s more static.

What kind of score did you want for the movie?

That’s a very complicated question because it’s a very restrained film where the emotions are kept bottled up. So I spent a lot of time finding the right musician and I ended up selecting Bardi Johannsson, an Icelandic composer. I wanted music that was both melodic and dissonant and it was very important that the music didn’t overshadow the emotion because that would have ruined the effect of the scene. I also wanted a score that would take on the symphonic nature of the ending.

CAST

Paul	JACQUES GAMBLIN
Claire	ALEXANDRA LAMY
Julien	FABIEN HÉRAUD
Sophie	SOPHIE DE FÜRST
Yohan	PABLO PAULY
Sergio	XAVIER MATHIEU

CREW

Director	NILS TAVERNIER
Producers	PHILIP BOËFFARD

	CHRISTOPHE ROSSIGNON
Written by	NILS TAVERNIER
	PIERRE LESSIEUX
	LAURENT BERTONI
Composer	BARDI JOHANSSON
Line producer	EVE FRANÇOIS-MACHUEL
Production manager	GUINAL RIOU
Post production manager	JULIEN AZOULAY
DOP	LAURENT MACHUEL
Production designer	JEAN-MICHEL SIMONET
Editor	YANN MALCOR
Artistic director	JEAN-MICHEL SIMONET
Live sound engineer	PASCAL JASMES
Sound designer	ALEXANDRE FLEURANT BRUNO SEZNEC
Mixing	THOMAS GAUDER
Set photographer	GUY FERRANDIS

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ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE In association with the soficas

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COFINOVA 9

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