

SOFTIE

A FILM BY **SAMUEL THEIS**



60° SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2021

2021 | Drama | France | Color | French | 93'



logline

In a hard world,
it takes true courage to be soft.





synopsis

Ten year-old Johnny stands out from his family and his tough neighborhood in Eastern France. He's sensitive, intelligent and interested in all kinds of things way beyond his years. With curiosity, he observes the ups and downs of his young single mother's turbulent love life. Things change when a new teacher, fresh from the big city, takes over Johnny's class. Mr. Adamski believes in Johnny and wants to open a new world to him. And the sophisticated young teacher also intrigues the boy.

info

After the success of PARTY GIRL (Cannes 2014 – Caméra d'Or, Prix d'Ensemble Un Certain Regard), Samuel Theis delves into the sentimental education of a young boy, based on his own life story.

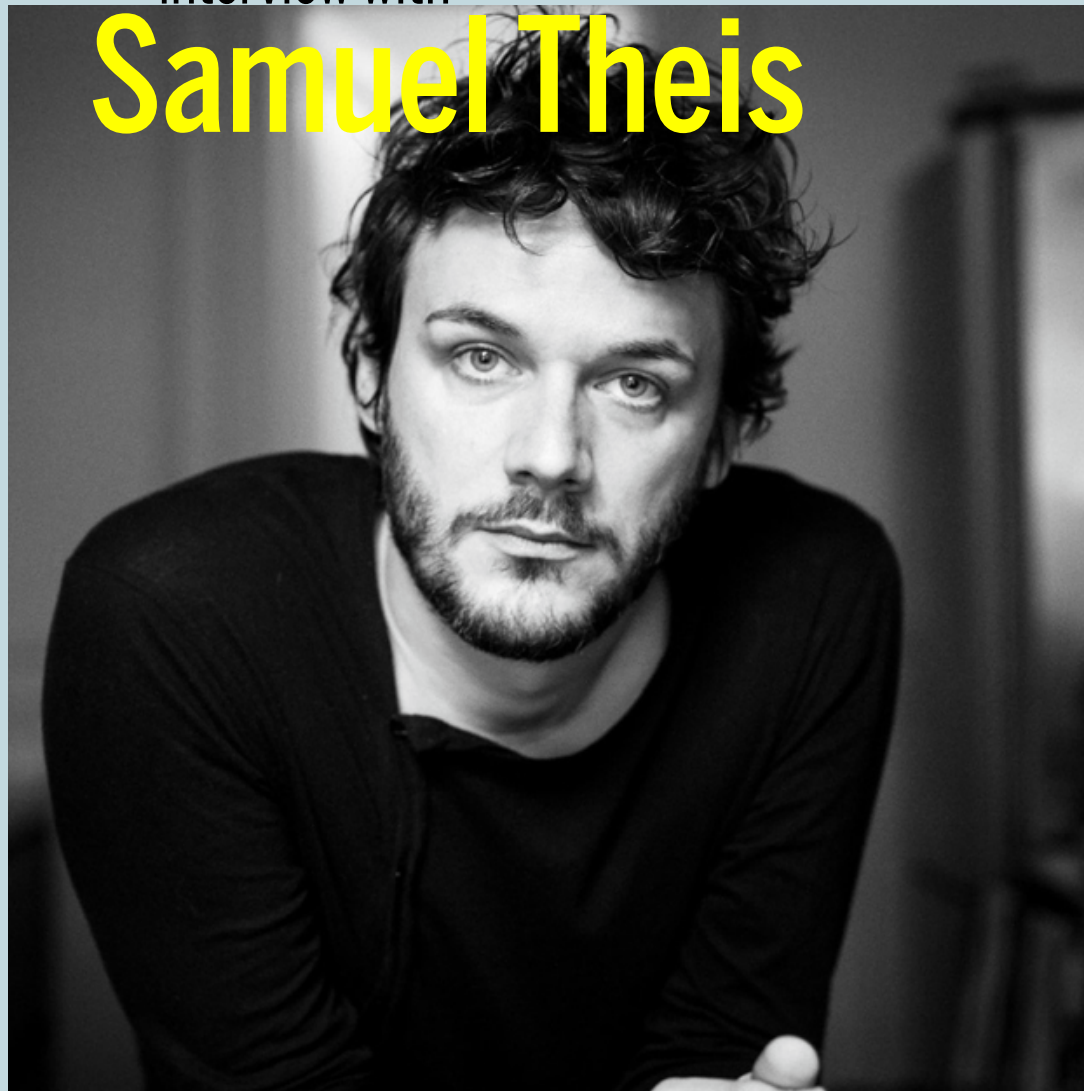
**"WE ARE ALL BRANDED
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SAMUEL THEIS



interview with

Samuel Theis



What inspired *Softie*?

— The film is largely autobiographical, although I took greater liberties than with *Party Girl*. *Softie* draws on my childhood but allows scope for a little more fiction. I didn't want to be so bound to reality. My first feature was almost archival, in the presentation of my family, my mother. It was also the story of a place and an environment, and I wanted to prolong that with *Softie*. Making *Party Girl*, I was constantly revisiting my childhood in the Lorraine region, and trying to recall the precise moment when I realized I wanted out. The film came out of that question: at what point in a child's life does the desire for emancipation emerge? It's a film about an awakening, every awakening—emotional, intellectual and sexual. Filming childhood always involves exploring the first times.

***Softie* plays on differences in social standing, but in mutual fascination mode rather than class struggle. Although he's only ten years old, it's beautiful to see Johnny becoming**

aware of his position on the social ladder, and deciding to work his way up.

— How do I see? How do we see each other? Seeing is an incredible playground. Children are compelled to see. Johnny comes from an underprivileged background, suffering from a deficit of structure and attention. Adamski provides both. He opens the doors of sensitivity, as well as awareness of himself and other people. The student and teacher mutually choose each other. There is not only Johnny's budding intelligence, but also his realization of his social origins, which is naturally accompanied by a sense of shame. Adamski is middle-class. There is cause to wonder if it's the only class to connect working and wealthier classes. The film is shot through by the issue of social shame, which nagged at me for a long time. I really struggled with that sense of shame, and it's most likely what led to me making movies. Rather than talking about myself, I try to give a voice to people who are never heard. To tell their stories, while respecting their complexity and without stigmatizing

them for the social deprivation around them. They are from an underprivileged environment but money is not the sole focus of their preoccupations. They are tackling issues that are much broader than mere survival. This is the tale of a premature emancipation, of the child moving on. Johnny takes flight through education. It's a bittersweet victory because it entails turning his back on his family.

Unlike *Party Girl*, the cast includes professional actors.

— Yes, there was the idea of creating a dialogue between two worlds that are juxtaposed. The issue of the representation of the working classes on screen is important and, for me, it's difficult to reconstitute that particular environment with actors. I feel a necessity to film people from the region, from that specific background, with those faces, bodies and turns of phrase. With the aim of raising their visibility.



To film them in their fictional lives, not just mine. In the film, the professional actors embody another social class. I found it amusing, in a meta dimension, the interplay in their different statuses.

It's never black and white. Each character is complex, with more or fewer likable facets. We see that not only with Adamski, but also with Johnny's mother, who is in turn loving and brutal, implanting codes of virility.

— When it is done by the mother, it is not so much a virile issue. I dodged the virile bullet. There was no man in the house. I grew up with women. As a result, however, they sidestepped the issue of how to create a female identity for themselves and cherry-picked from males. It's interesting that it is the mother encouraging Johnny to fight back, rejecting his sensitivity. In that environment, there is a battle for position. You need to learn to respond to violence



and not get trampled on. Not to be a softie. The film's title functions as ironic commentary while, on screen, Johnny is demonstrating unbelievable strength.

In the scene where Johnny flips and criticizes his mother's diet, he has within him an instinctive awareness of his condition, as if he had read Marx or Bourdieu.

— It's an impulse for life expressing itself at that moment, against his family's immobility —the intuition that he needs to escape his fate in social terms. He throws his difference in their faces, but his aggression is directed at himself as much as them. Johnny has a way of standing up to adults that is reminiscent of Bergman's Alexander or François in *L'enfance nue*. A child's earnestness. Because, in childhood, nothing is minor. When I was little, I could see there was injustice. Some people come to terms with it, but that was impossible for me!

I couldn't understand how people could be resigned to living in those conditions. I knew then that I would leave and live something different, that I would build another life for myself somewhere else.

The sexual awakening of a ten-year-old boy is a sensitive subject. How did you approach it when writing the film?

— The aim, from the first drafts, was to stay solely with Johnny's perspective, child-high. That's the film's proposition: a film that captures a child's view of the world, not a vision of childhood. We are immersed in his discovery of sensuality, flustered and fumbling with him. A lot of people have said there are two movies in my movie. First, the issue of Johnny's emancipation, uprooting himself and, then, the burgeoning of sexual desire. For me, however, those two issues are closely linked. I could not dissociate them. I wanted to make both dimensions





interact and show that one is the expression of the other. There were many potential pitfalls. The topic of sexual desire in children is still very taboo. And it's multiple. It depends on each individual. Sexuality was an issue for me from an early age. At age ten, when desire manifests itself, it's complex, especially when that desire is directed toward an adult. There is a responsibility in the manner of its portrayal. You need to think about what you show. I chose to remain on the reserved side.

Indeed, the film handles the protagonist's sexual awakening very gradually and delicately.

— I wanted to depict the multiplicity of desires. Johnny is on the threshold of adolescence. It's still a time of great freedom of physical expression. That's another thing I really like in the story of that age. There is physical attraction, what happens in a body, but there is also what happens inside a head.

With Johnny, desire also consists of his thirst for knowledge. Adamski comes from Lyon, which immediately sounds very exotic to a boy who has never left Forbach. He embodies learning, which triggers a libido of knowledge in Johnny. Bourdieu calls it the *libido sciendi*. Adamski embodies a whole different world. He is the mentor, the master, as they used to say at school. Children are explorers. In their desire, there is something similar to conquest, a form of omnipotence. Also, I feel that our relationship to the world is above all through the body. At x when it cannot yet be put into words. Desire as a dynamic force, then, but also marking a deficiency, a source of wavering.

When Johnny finally declares his feelings to Adamski, the teacher rejects them point-blank. His "no" is brutal, cruel for Johnny, but necessary perhaps?

— You have to take into account that teachers are mired in an anxiety-inducing climate. Classrooms are no longer closed, a teacher can never be alone in a room with a student. There is a lot of tension around these issues nowadays, which children also sense most likely. Adamski's brutality at that moment partly stems from that context. He may have boxed himself into a corner by allowing Johnny into his house. I wanted the characters to be fluctuating with regard to recommended behaviors, never entirely within the guidelines. Is an emotional bond a prerequisite of education? Despite everything, Adamski's response to Johnny's request is the right one. He is not at all hazy on the moral issue, but I also liked the hint of pettiness and cruelty in his rejection: he shuts the door on Johnny, putting the child in his place with no tools to understand what just happened. It does not entail a dialogue between them. The awkwardness of being the object of desire takes up all the space there is.

Softie is being released against the backdrop of several stories of incest or sexual relations between adults and adolescents, which have generated widespread debate. What is different about your film is that the desire comes from the child. Do you think the film runs the risk of being misunderstood?

— On these issues, clearly the current climate can be frightening. Trouble is, the form of these confrontations leaves no room for debate or nuanced arguments. Human experience is more diverse and mysterious than outraged debates. I think movies should be able to talk about anything, and ignore these media feeding frenzies. However, the director cannot dodge the moral issues raised by the film. The adult's response to a child brimming over with desire was very important to me. The film is very clear on that. A child projecting desire onto an adult is a situation based on personal experience. Actually, reality was



even more explosive than the film. That's why the adult in the film had to be beyond reproach. Fiction allowed me to respond to reality. The filmmaker's responsibility is greater when children are on screen because the audience cannot help but lend symbolic meaning to everything a child does. When you watch a child in a movie, you are immediately cast back into your own childhood. Whatever the child is doing, to us it is as if all childhood is doing it. The film was made in an important context of successive waves of #metoo, which informed our work. With Antoine (Reinartz, who plays Adamski), we often discussed Stefan Zweig's *Confusion*. Johnny's desire is not only sexual; above all, it is intellectual. In life, the border between the world of children and the world of adults is more permeable than we think. There are gray areas. The difference between adult and child is that adults are responsible for their acts whereas children aren't.



Softie features superb work by an excellent cast, and especially young Aliocha Reinert. How did you find him?

— We undertook a long period of random casting in the Lorraine region, focusing on Johnny and his mother. Children are always tricky. It's always a first time. You have to see lots of them. The idea that anyone can act is wrong. To act in a movie you must be happy to let people watch you. We spent a long time looking. I wanted a kid with long hair, a delicate nature, already inhabited by issues of sexuality and gender. Aliocha came along. He had long hair, he did ballet. I told his parents what happens in the film. I wanted it to be clear and, very smartly, they told me it was Aliocha's decision. He asked for some time to think it over, which I found quite beautiful. He called me back a few days later, saying he felt he was capable of defending the character, and wanted to do it. Aliocha is not Johnny, and I thought his

decision and motives were very brave. He possesses an intensity, a sensitivity and grace in the way he moves, the way he is, and the way he accepts the gaze of others. There are actors who are in control, who create, and others who let go and allow things to be "stolen" from them. Aliocha is one of the latter.

And you found his mother, Mélissa Olexa, in the same way?

— Yes. She comes from Metz, where she works as a cleaner along with her mother. The family is mostly made up of women. They embody a femininity that is sensitive but not fragile or weak. For me, it was important for the mother to be combative, not resigned or alienated by the environment she inhabits. For non-professional actors also, it's always a first time. It's very moving to see them gradually taking themselves off the leash. At the initial screen test, Mélissa said she was just curious to know what



an audition was like. But behind those words, there was a distinct sense of engagement, a strong desire to make movies. It was beautiful to watch them gradually succumb to their desire, and become real pros during the shoot.

How did you choose to direct them?

— My script was very wordy, but I don't give it to the actors. I don't want to tie them down to something, so they improvise out of a particular situation. I give them the plot points and sometimes a few lines. It's a way of keeping the whole set in the here-and-now, so that in shooting the scene we get close to what's on the pages of the script. Mélissa had a natural understanding of scenes and conflict, and even when she improvised, there was very little that I couldn't use. Some actors are able to write on set. Others need the support of a text. I like to think Mélissa is playing a younger version of my mother, as if *Softie* were

a prequel to *Party Girl*. She's not playing a Mother Courage figure. She doesn't forget what she wants as a woman.

Antoine Reinartz is pitch-perfect. He also has an instantly recognizable voice. Was he your first choice?

— I did some auditions. What interested me in Antoine was his youth. He's a very joined-up guy. In performance, his elocution is indeed striking. There is something feminine about him, which can be troubling. I was scared that it might wrap the story up in clichés, but that was soon evacuated when I teamed Antoine with Izia Higelin. She brought sexuality to the couple. It's odd because gender-wise, they are practically reversed. They were a great fit. Antoine tends to inject a little irregularity, feverishness, into his speech, which I really love. He is vibrant, restless.

And Izia Higelin?

— In screen tests, she was very open and attentive. Izia is an actress who leaves room for her scene partner, but she also has presence and power. She makes no apology for being a woman with desires. You believe in her character, a woman who takes an interest in a child and is prepared to break the rules to take him to a museum. She embodies the idea that more should be done to stop gaps in society widening. We need to be more daring, braver, in order to counter every kind of determinism.

What was it like working with Jacques Girault, a young director of photography?

— Our protagonist was a child, and legal guidelines impose shooting days that are half the usual length. We weren't working to a huge budget, so flexibility was required. Jacques had shot Camille Vidal-Naquet's

Sauvage, and I thought its handheld camerawork was spot-on in keeping up with, or away from, the actors. It was elegant and sensual. That's what I wanted. But I also wanted a more poised, staged aesthetic at times. It was about striking a balance between edginess in the representation of the social context and sensuality in the style of Andrea Arnold, who films the working classes with real flair. Jacques was the right person for the job. We spent a lot of time working on how to film children, what height for the camera and so on. We were very keen to have low-angle shots of the children, for example. The children automatically bring a poetic element. There's no need to manufacture it, just let the poetry emerge all on its own. Jacques isn't locked into a particular method. He keeps exploring on set, and I liked that. It was very enjoyable working with him.

You are clearly deeply attached to Forbach and the Lorraine region. Do you think you'll

always shoot there, like the Dardenne brothers in *Seraing*?

— It's a process, which will almost certainly lead me to film someplace else one day, but for now, I'm not done with that area. I like the idea that my films possess a social and regional identity. I believe it's a world that suffers from a deficit of representation. The working classes have gradually vanished from mainstream media. There was a recent resurgence with the yellow vest protests, but it was soon smothered. With violent class-based contempt. I think this contributes to the evacuation of the class struggle and class contradictions. Of course, it's not enough just to film the working classes. There must be a defined perspective and motivation, which involves issues that take time to unpack: what is my take on this section of society? What do I choose to say about it? Not reducing working-class neighborhoods to the inevitability of unemployment



and delinquency. There are no guarantees for films like mine. There's not enough glamor in filming the working classes and unknown faces. Yet it is a rich seam in film history: Pialat, the Dardenne brothers, Italian neo-realism. Getting back to Forbach, I like to think my films speak to each other. Party Girl was the story of a woman who wants to escape society, while Softie focuses on a little boy who wants to join it at all costs. ▬



cast

ALIOCHA REINERT as Johnny

ANTOINE REINARTZ as Mr. Adamski

MÉLISSA OLEXA as Sonia

IZÏA HIGELIN as Nora



with Jade Schwartz Ilario Gallo Abdel Benchendikh Romane Esch Mérésia Litzenburger Danielle Dalhem Maïa Quesmand Claire Burger

crew

Screenplay, adaptation and dialogues **Samuel Theis** - Produced by **Caroline Bonmarchand**
Director of Photography **Jacques Girault** - Script Supervisor **Alice Douard** - Assistant Director **Guillaume Huin**
Production Manager **Nicolas Leclere** - Unit Production Manager **Vincent Léonard** - Casting **Julie Allione, Laure Ballarin, Adélaïde Mauvernay** - Sound Mixer **François Abdelnour** - Production Design **Mila Preli**
Costume Design **Rachèle Raoult** - Make-Up **Marine Tesson** - Post-Production Supervisor **Xenia Sulyma**
Editing **Nicolas Desmaison** and **Esther Lowe** - Sound Editor **Fanny Martin** - Dialogue Editor **Jeanne Delplancq**
Re-Recording Mixer **Olivier Guillaume** - Color Grading **Yov Moor** - Original Score by **Ulysse Klotz**

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with the support of the **Région Grand Est, Le Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée** and **Angoa**

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