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A Pie Films and Haut et Court production

הגננת

THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

A FILM BY NADAV LAPID

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2014 - Israel/France - 120 min - 1.85

Press kit and stills available to download on www.le-pacte.com





SYNOPSIS

*Hagar is beautiful enough
Enough for me
Enough for me
Gold rain falls over her house.
It is truly the sun of god.*

In a world that does not appreciate artists, where sensitive souls don't stand a chance, a poetry-loving kindergarten teacher discovers a child poet and decides to take it upon herself. To nurture him. To save his greatness from the world, to salvage him from the banal, the mediocre and the crude – to save him from life itself. It is the story of a female Don Quixote, who strives to save the world through the poetry of a child, and of a pensive child who has no desire to be saved.

INTERVIEW WITH NADAV LAPID

In the history of cinema, films about poetry are rare. Why did you choose this subject?

One of the issues *The Kindergarten Teacher* addresses is the place of useless things in a world that is all about gain, loss or profit. Poetry doesn't follow the logic of economics. Unlike a thick and heavy novel, it is not the product of months of work. It is impulsive, written spontaneously, read immediately, and sometimes remains an enigma. It is often difficult to explain what a poem is, what it's for, and why it is so important that it exist. It is frequently situated in that gray area between the deepest truth and deception. The mystery of the child's poems- what is the genesis of his poems? - resist the kindergarten teacher's attempt to find order and logic, to understand where the child's words are coming from.

Poetry, written quickly and instantaneously – the words appear in the blink of an eye – thus reflects a child's partial conscience and his innocent vision of his own act of poetry. Does the child see himself as a poet? Does he understand that the words he utters are poems?

To what extent is your film autobiographical?

Between the ages of four and a half and seven years old, I wrote around one hundred poems or, more precisely, I told them to my nanny. The first one, titled "Hagar," was a love poem, a poem about an impossible love for the older sister of a classmate. "A Separation," quoted at the end of the film, is one of my last. At the age of seven, I stopped writing poems. It wasn't until the end of my military service that I began writing again, but never poetry. My parents had put my poems away in a closet and there they remained for twenty-five years, until I decided to use them for a film.

The Kindergarten Teacher consequently has an obviously autobiographical dimension. But I am as much the child as I am the teacher. The anxiety, the urgency felt by the teacher when faced with the marginalization of a certain art, a sensitivity, are feelings I have experienced myself.



How did you find the young actor who plays the role of Yoav?

We did think of choosing an older and more experienced child. But after auditioning a large number of children, we picked Avi Shnaidman, a five-year-old child, who had never acted before. Avi's body language is rather hesitant, he has a particular way of "whistling" certain syllables and showed an instinctive and intimate understanding of emotional situations within the film. He has that hesitation and fragility, something yet uncompleted, that tend to disappear in older children.

I didn't want to direct a cliché of the young prodigy, but rather a child who was normal, yet with a little extra something about him.

I wanted the child's words to emerge in a mysterious way. While writing the screenplay and during the casting, I felt that the child's creative process when writing the poems must contain something arbitrary, unexplained. The process should resist the kindergarten teacher's desire to decipher the undecipherable. We may ask ourselves continuously "where do the words come from?" and persist in coming up with answers, knowing full well that an obvious answer will never be found. And so we had to find a child who will permit us to raise this question but also will permit us the refusal to reply.

How does one work with children?

The scenes with the children in the kindergarten were a major challenge, even a source of some anguish, yet they later proved to be the key that determined and influenced the directing.

I had to orchestrate elaborate camera movements and structured, organized sequence shots, while capturing the children's totally uncontrollable spontaneity. Not allowing the camera to be subjected to the children's chaos, nor taming the children to the tyranny of the frame but creating a tension, almost juxtaposing the rigidity of the camera movements and the children's disorderliness. Children constantly defied the camera's attempts to impose order, creating a conflict between the frame and what goes on within it.



Poetry is not only the subject of the film but also, in a way, its substance or its material. What were your staging choices in this film?

I wanted to construct sequence shots for the group scenes which sometimes, thanks to the staging or to a change in the depth of field, led to more intimate shots that focus on an individual's face, detached from his surroundings. This was to express a tension between the individual and the group, the child and the adult, the concrete reality and the conscience. I also filmed «much too tight» close-ups, which enabled me to break the classic distance between the camera and the characters. "Primitive," brutal shots were developed, in which we have the impression that the actor is "walking on the camera," knocking into it, attacking it.

I wanted the viewer to have the feeling of attempting to penetrate the actor's inner world while observing him from a too close distance. Like the kindergarten teacher who tries obstinately to get inside the child's head, to understand "where do the words come from." This aesthetic also conjures up the style of contemporary images, those of mobile phones for example, "selfies," those somewhat claustrophobic, raw, extravagant, narcissistic images.

After *Policeman*, a socially-orientated film, *The Kindergarten Teacher* would appear to be a change of direction. How do you see the relationship between the two films?

I believe these films are much closer than it would seem. They are even twin films in their basic essence. In both of them there is a female character at war with "the spirit of our times." These two films are about resistance. A female character declares war against the age she lives in even if the character of the kindergarten teacher, like that of the anarchist in *Policeman*, has already fallen victim to ills she wants to eradicate. She is motivated by a sort of "radical purity." Faced with lies, the dirtiness of our era, she aspires to an absolute truth, but to get there she resorts to lies and deceit to reach her goal. The kindergarten teacher perceives this world as a hell that must be resisted at all cost. In both films this resistance ends in failure. You can't fight what is in the air, "l'air du temps." You can't get away from it: "l'air du temps" is the air we all breathe...




One of the film's successes is the way in which it captures today's world: the mind-numbing power of television, the violence and vulgarity of the streets, the economic domination of the rich. At the same time, you also describe the extraordinary energy and vitality of our era.

The spirit of the times manifests fairly regularly in the film, both in its content and its style. Vulgarity, narcissism, egocentricity, conformism, aggressiveness, platitude, worship of profit and triumph over others. And at the same time, ours is also an era of dynamism, energy, a kind of wild and very sexual impetus, as expressed by Yoav's father in his monologue, in which he speaks of all those who he can't stand, those who refuse the "spirit of the times." The other very contemporary character in the film is the nanny: she frees herself from all modesty and timidity by publicly imposing her beauty, strength and her talent.

Like in *Policeman*, you do indeed compare and contrast two universes: the materialistic, hedonistic, cynical world of capitalist society and the "spiritual" world of poetry. Yet the dichotomy isn't that simple; for example, you do not in any way idealize the world of poetry, also described as narcissistic and dominated by relationships of force and jealousy.

Absolutely. There is no absolute virtue. Both worlds are contaminated by the same phenomena, that is to say the spirit of the times and ordinary human behavior. The marginalization of poetry and the milieu to which it belongs influence the way in which its adepts see themselves. This produces an excess of self-awareness, awareness of one's own marginality, which means that timeless rivalries suddenly seem petty and pathetic. So narcissism seems ridiculous; rituals and gestures that used to be amusing and colorful now seem pretentious.





The film's complexity and ambivalence also manifests through the character of the kindergarten teacher who aspires to a sort of ideal through poetry, but who is also capable of lies and betrayal in the name of this ideal.

Sarit Larry, who plays the kindergarten teacher, comes from a religious family and a background that has no link with the artistic world. She was a very active member of a religious youth movement. After an ideological dispute with the headmaster of her school, she abandoned religion to devote herself to theatre. Sarit studied at a very prestigious theatre school and just on the brink of a successful career with Israel's national theatre, she decided to give it all up and devote herself to studying philosophy. I made contact with her – a strange coincidence – via Facebook ("l'air du temps"), when she was living in Boston, after having defended her philosophy thesis, nearly sixteen years after leaving the stage.

Something in her personality, her commitment, her radicalism and the bold choices that mapped her life, resonate with Nira's character. Nira is both a kindergarten teacher and a firm believer in poetry, a mother and a Don Quichotte who wants to save the world. She is determination itself, an unstoppable woman with no limits. Essentially, of all the fairly exceptional characters that she meets along her path – the nanny and narcissistic actress, the poetry teacher, the blasé artist, the arriviste father not lacking in charm, the (ex) poet uncle, and even the prodigal child- Nira is the most extreme character, the most uncompromising and the wildest. She embodies that typical mixture of revolutionaries, between innocence and violence, between strong insights and total thoughtlessness. She hungers for absolute justice and is capable of anything to obtain it.



Yoav's character is also deeply disconcerting: his face suggests innocence, intelligence, but also something almost demonic. As if he were already aware of his seductive powers...

At first glance, we cannot help but succumb to the charm of a five-year-old child poet and fear the kindergarten teacher's obsession with him. But at times Yoav appears to be not all that innocent. As if he were aware of his seductive power and his hold over her, aware of Nira's desperate need to earn his recognition and win his approval. Yoav's perspicuity leads him to play with her, opening up to her from time to time only to shut down again immediately. I feel that having met Yoav's father, we might wonder if the child will resemble him one day. We also inevitably ask ourselves the question: who really holds the power? Who is the real victim in the ambiguous relationship between the child and his teacher?

The film takes place in Israel and tackles specific aspects of Israeli society, such as the social conflict between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, yet it is also very universal...

Indeed the film is about Israeli society, the army for example, that blots out the last traces of sensitivity in its young recruits such as the kindergarten teacher's son, sending them off to accomplish their duty "as soldiers and as men." Or the divide in Israeli society between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi, an internal conflict with which the kindergarten teacher identifies (although each society has its own

Ashkenazi and Sephardi). It also seems to me that the film reflects the radical transformation of Israeli society into an ultra materialistic and vulgar society. In Israel, a young country without tradition, this transformation has been swifter, more brutal and perhaps more visible than it is elsewhere. In Israel, everything is more transparent, exposed, stripped naked. However, the film's universal aspect is in the relationship between poetry and today's world...

The end of the film is open, with Yoav's lingering look to camera, at the viewer. Why did you chose to end the film this way and, in your opinion, what will Yoav become in ten years time?

What does the child see when he looks at us? His own future? All of our futures? The end of Culture? Will he be like his father, abandoning poetry once he has understood how the world works? Will the world crush him and turn him into a shadow as the kindergarten teacher fears? Will he still write poems, or is this his last poem? Could this be the very moment in which a new poem is born in his mind? If that's the case, who will write it down? All around, the music continues to blare out, blending with the surrounding hysteria.

The ugly hotel swimming pool, with men and women in bathing suits swimming or shouting. Happiness, joy, people having fun. The child's expression is troubled. There aren't many reasons to be optimistic.

NADAV LAPID

Nadav studied cinema at the “Sam Spiegel” school in Jerusalem as well as philosophy and history at the Tel-Aviv University and literature at the University of Paris 8. He worked as a cinematographer for several documentaries in Israel and published a novel entitled Danse encore (Continua Bailando) in January 2010 with Actes Sud Editions.

He directed three short films. His first feature film “The Policeman” was developed at the Cinefondation Residence and presented at L’Atelier de Cannes 2008. The film represented Israel at the European Awards, was awarded with the Special Jury Award at Locarno Film Festival 2011 and won more than 15 awards in festivals all over the world, including Best Film and Best Director at Bafici 2011 and Best Film in San Francisco 2011. It has been selected in almost a hundred of international festivals such as the New York Film Festival 2011, London Film Festival 2011...

FILMOGRAPHY

Short films

2004 Mahmud works in the Industry, docufiction (Cannes 2004 Cinéfondation)

2005 Road, fiction (Berlinale 2005, Golden Bear at the Aveny Film Festival 2005)

2006 Emile’s Girlfriend, fiction (Cannes 2006 Cinéfondation)

Feature films

2011 The Policeman, Special Jury Prize at Locarno Film Festival

2014 The Kindergarten Teacher, Critic’s Week – Special Screening

CAST

Nira	SARIT LARRY
Yoav	AVI SHNAIDMAN
Nira’s husband	LIOR RAZ
The poetry teacher	HAMUCHTAR
Miri	ESTER RADA
Assi	GUY OREN
Yoav’s father	YEHEZKEL LAZAROV
Yoav’s uncle	DAN TOREN
Nira’s assistant	AVISHAG KAHALANI

CREW

Written and directed by

Nadav Lapid

Producers

Talia Kleinhendler

Osnat Handelsman-Keren - Pie Films

Carole Scotta - Haut et Court

Simon Arnal, Caroline Benjo

Julie Billy

Shai Goldman

Era Lapid

Orit Azulay

Ilan Gazit, Yehuda Bello, Limor Shmila

Miguel Merkin

Doron Ashkenazi

Mélanie Hadad

Aviv Aldema

Marina Kertez

Bruno Mercère

Avi Satat, Michal Ben Gad

Zehava Shekel

Clare Downs, Haim Lapid

Associate Producers

Line Producer

Director of Photography

Editor

Casting director

Children casting

Production Designer

Costume Designer

Make-up artist

Sound Designer

Sound Recorder

Mixer

1st assistants director

Line Producer on set

Script Editors

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