



Patron: Jim Broadbent
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Friday May 12th, 2017
Little Men (Cert PG)

dir: **Ira Sachs**

Starring: **Theo Taplitz, Michael Barbieri, Greg Kinnear, Jennifer Ehle**

Sponsors: **Andrew Howard**

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Synopsis: Present-day Brooklyn. The Jardine family are moving into the apartment they have inherited from 13 year-old Jake's grandfather, who has recently died. The ground floor of the building is occupied by Leonor, a dressmaker. Jake and Leonor's son Tony hit it off immediately, despite being temperamental opposites. When Jake's father Brian decides to increase Leonor's rent, to help augment the family income, a row develops between them. Jake and Tony are caught up in the row but refuse to take sides. When Brian insists Leonor must pay the increase or be evicted, Jake begs him not to, but in vain. Later, Jake sees Tony with a group of friends, but there is no contact between them.

In Ira Sachs' previous film, *Love is Strange* (2014), two gay men in a long-term relationship are forced apart not through any slackening of love between them but simply on financial grounds: with New York city rents skyrocketing, they can no longer afford their shared apartment. It's a theme taken up again in Sach's latest film, though from the opposite angle: when actor Brian Jardine and his family move into the Brooklyn apartment he's inherited from his father, he finds himself under pressure to quadruple the rent paid by dressmaker Leonor, whose shop occupies the ground floor. The relationship threatened with fracture, though, isn't between Brian and Leonor, who barely know each other, but between their teenage sons, Jake and Tony, who strike up an instant friendship with no more than the mildest hint of homoeroticism; they just enjoy each other's company, partly it seems for the contrast in their temperaments: Jake is the quiet, sensitive one, while Tony is outgoing and ebullient. Sachs has described them respectively as Bresson and Scorsese characters.

Sachs and Mauricio Zacharias, co-writing as they did on *Love is Strange* and its predecessor *Keep The Lights On* (2012), have created an appealingly low-key drama with no recourse to grandstanding scenes. The nod to Chekhov (Brian is playing Trigorin in a local theatre production of *The Seagull*) makes perfect sense: nuance and understatement rule, and what's not said most of the time is as significant as what is. Sachs often lets his camera do the talking: Tony's attraction to Eva, a pretty classmate, emerges not through anything he says when they're in a group together, but in the way the camera singles her out and lingers on her face, acting as his surrogate. The delight Tony and Jake find in each other's company is expressed in a series of exhilarated lateral tracking shots, skimming alongside them as they scooter and roller-skate along the Brooklyn sidewalks. Though by way of a contrast, there's one gloriously hyper-vocal scene when Tony, who's taking acting classes, gets into a synthetic shouting match with his drama teacher



(Mauricio Bustamante); given the latter's shaven head and in-yer-face stance, this looks singularly like a knowing spoof of *Whiplash* (2014).

As in *Love Is Strange*, Sachs creates a potent sense of place. Largely shot in and around the Brooklyn neighbourhood it portrays, *Little Men* captures the feel of a district that still retains something of its lively class and ethnic mix but is inexorably gentrifying, smoothing out the rougher and more idiosyncratic edges. And of course it's that same process of gentrification that fuels the plot, with Brian reluctantly putting the screws on Leonor. It would be easy to present the dressmaker, a Chilean immigrant single mother, as the hapless victim of a greedy Wasp couple, callously forced out of her humble livelihood, but Sachs and Zacharias have nothing so crude in mind. This is a world where, in the best Renoir-esque tradition, *tout le monde a ses raisons*; characters are rounded, and nobody is patronised or demonised. Brian (Greg Kinnear) and his wife Kathy (Jennifer Ehle), though essentially well meaning, aren't always the most tactful in their dealings with Leonor (Pauline Garcia) and she in her turn isn't above using moral blackmail, telling Brian that she was "more family" to his father Max than he ever was, that Max had never dreamed of raising her rent, and hinting that they were lovers. The nearest approximation to a villain, possibly, is Brian's sister Audrey (Talia Balsam), who pressurises her brother to insist on the rent increase while staying at a prudent distance from the haggling; but even she is shown as acting from necessity rather than avarice.

Excellent though the adult principles are, acting honours go to Theo Taplitz and Michael Barbieri as Jake and Tony, both making their feature film debut. There's a refreshing directness and honesty in their performances that make their characters wholly believable as just teenagers negotiating what Taplitz himself calls "that in-between age where you're still trying to figure out who you are"; and their scenes together, with their jokes, mood swings and their intrigued mutual exploration of their contrasted backgrounds and temperaments, ring wholly true. Sachs has cited as his inspiration Ozu's films "*I Was Born, But...*" (1932) and its remake *Good Morning* (1959), in which two small boys, like Jake and Tony, decide to boycott their parents. If *Little Men* doesn't quite achieve that exalted level - the ending falls a little flat - it's still a work of subtle charm and exceptional psychological impact, well up to its makers' previous work.

Credits

Greg Kinnear	Brian Jardine
Jennifer Ehle	Kathy Jardine
Pauline Garcia	Leonor Calvelli
Theo Taplitz	Jake Jardine
Michael Barbieri	Tony Calvelli
Talia Balsam	Audrey
Maliq Johnson	Umar
Anthony Angelo Flamminio	Joey
Madison Wright	Julia
Mauricio Bustamante	Acting teacher
John Procaccino	Mr Plummer
Alfred Molina	Hernán
Ching Valdez-Aran	Pilar
Stan Carp	Sal Bartolini
Stella Schnabel	Nina
Yolanda Ross	Arkadina
Teeka Duplessis	Eva
Director	Ira Sachs
Screenplay	Ira Sachs, Maurice Zacharias
Editors	Mollie Goldstein, Affonso Gonçalves
Director of Photography	Oscar Durán
Original Music	Dickon Hinchcliffe
Sound Design	Damian Volpe
Costume Design	Eden Miller
Production Design	Alexandra Schaller

Another View

On the surface, “Little Men” is a movie about gentrification, hinging on a Brooklyn building (set up with an apartment upstairs and a small shop down below) passed from one generation to the next, where the tenant renting the street-level space gets pinched by the neighborhood’s trendy new identity. But no one goes to the movies to watch stories of gentrification (just ask “Nasty Baby” director Sebastian Silva). Though Sachs’ observations do succeed in personalizing the phenomenon, the reason we go — indeed, the reason we care — is because “Little Men” is also a story about love, and as Sachs has poignantly noted before, love is strange.

As it happens, Sachs’ previous film may as well have been a dry run for this micro-portrait, with its subplot concerning two heterosexual teens whose friendship is buffeted by the concerns of the adults around them. Here, the kid dynamic takes center stage, opening on 13-year-old Jake (Theo Taplitz), whose drawing of yellow stars against a green sky is dismissed by a burnt-out middle-school teacher. It may seem like a rather insignificant moment in the young man’s life, but just contrast the potential influence that adult comment has on his artistic future with the more overtly encouraging conversations he shares with Tony (Michael Barbieri), the son of the immigrant seamstress who’s been renting his grandfather’s store for the past several years. Because Sachs has made this movie for grown-ups, most will probably focus on the conflict between Jake’s and Tony’s parents: After Jake’s grandfather passes away, his folks, Brian (Greg Kinnear) and Kathy (Jennifer Ehle), take possession of his building, inheriting a financial headache in which the downstairs dress shop was being leased for less than it cost — and perhaps one-fifth of its estimated value — to a Chilean single mother named Leonor (Paulina Garcia). Raising the rent is a delicate matter and one that Brian and his sister, Audrey (Talia Balsam), go about broaching with a passive-aggressiveness virtually unique to those of the Caucasian persuasion.

Meanwhile, making friends in that way that comes so easily to children — where the perfect intersection of geography, gender and age is often all that is necessary for two otherwise completely different individuals to forge a meaningful bond — the naturally

outgoing Tony recognizes that Jake is something of an introvert, but reaches out anyway, offering to show him around the neighborhood and later inviting him over to play video games. Their bond is strong enough that once their parents start to quarrel, instead of taking sides, they stick together, giving the adults the silent treatment.

Naturally, the adults need to sort out the real-estate mess, although it’s telling that nearly every scene is seen through the children’s eyes. Even the exceptions, as when Brian rehearses for an Off Off Broadway revival of “The Seagull” (since Chekhov’s “The Cherry Orchard” probably would have been too on-the-nose), are significant only insofar as they interest the kids — in this case, because Tony also dreams of being an actor (in real life, Barbieri has Pacino’s charisma, plus a New York Italian accent thicker than Stallone’s), and subsequently tries to convince Jake to join him in applying to the LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts. Again, there’s that sense that Tony serves as the key champion for Jake’s artistic future. Compare a scene in which they discuss his drawings with one in which Jake, deeply wounded that some of his favorite sketches appear to have gotten thrown out during the move, is lectured by his father on how it can feel good to let things go — one moment helps set his career path in motion, while the other represents the sort of resentment Jake will likely harbor for life. These are precisely the sort of moments in which Sachs and screenwriter Mauricio Zacharias specialize, like painters whose every brushstroke represents a childhood memory that will ultimately come to define these two little men.

As the disagreement between Leonor and her landlords escalates, the boys’ friendship also advances, and there are subtle clues that it has reached the level of love: Attending a different school from Jake, Tony sticks up for his friend, sparking a cafeteria fistfight in the process, while back in English class, Jake’s mind presumably races to thoughts of Tony when assigned to write a poem about someone he loves. Their connection is purely platonic, and even leaves room for Tony to hit on a girl in his acting workshop, though the possibility exists that Jake could later turn out to be gay (another way in which their connection echoes “Love Is Strange,” which toyed with our assumptions as to its teens’ sexuality). The fact is, what these two boys share is beautiful. As Brian admits, friendships don’t come so easily later in life, and the fact that theirs is tested by the pettiness of their parents amounts to tragedy of a kind. Instead of laying on the melodrama, Sachs keeps things subtle, telling his story almost exclusively through quiet moments, some of them so minor that our minds wander away entirely. Though “Little Men” was made on a startlingly small budget, nearly every supporting detail — from d.p. Oscar Duran’s careful framing to Dickon Hinchcliffe’s life-affirming score (which hums with the anticipation of better things to come) — adds value to this little gem.

Peter Debruge Variety

Our next film - Friday September 8th 2017 Frantz (France 2016. Cert 12a)

Set in 1919, Frantz is the story of Anna, a young German woman whose fiancé, Franz has been killed in the war. She is still grieving for him, as are his parents who also harbour strong anti-French sentiments. But when Frenchman Adrien, who claims to have known Franz well, appears, the three of them begin a journey that will change their lives.

François Ozon’s new film (released today) is a handsomely shot, magnificently romantic work that opens our 65th season in style.

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