

Interview: Director Ira Sachs on Modern Life Issues Explored in ‘Little Men’

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CHICAGO – When meeting an interview subject for the third time, and remembering him as the first professional interview I ever did, results in a comfortable familiarity. Director Ira Sachs is the subject, and his latest film is “Little Men.” Taking on adolescent friendship, adult passive-aggressiveness and gentrification all in one film, it also spotlights the expansiveness of this talented filmmaker.

“Little Men” features Greg Kinnear in one of his best performances, as a guilty and conflicted property inheritor named Brian who now lives in Brooklyn, in the midst of the hottest real estate markets in America. His late father owned the property, which included a dressmaker’s shop run by Leonor (Paulina García), who cared for her landlord more than his heirs. Meanwhile, Brian’s son Jake (Theo Taplitz), has found a friend and fellow traveler in Tony (Michael Barbieri), who happens to be Leonor’s son. Property, negotiations and hard feelings endanger the two boys’ connection, and test all emotions.



Ira Sachs at the Chicago Critics Film Festival

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Director Ira Sachs has forged a career in cinematically expressing human relations, beginning with his first major release, “Forty Shades of Blue” (2005). He followed that film with the throwback mystery, “Married Life” (2007), and went towards more autobiographical topics in “Keep the Lights On” (2012) and “Love is Strange” (2014), both about men in same sex relationships.

Ira Sach’s films are characterized by authenticity and metaphor, open to interpretations and full of human empathy. HollywoodChicago.com interviewed the director for the third time regarding “Little Men,” as it was featured at the Chicago Critics Film Festival in May of 2016.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you think this moment in time is the most challenging for the borough of Brooklyn – with the intense gentrification – more so even in its decline from the 1950s through the 1970s?

Ira Sachs: I tend not to think that anything I happen to be reporting on in my films is special. Meaning that people are always saying to me, ‘you must love New York, you have it in all your films.’ But mostly it’s because I know New York, and I know Brooklyn at this time. I know the lives there, because I have lived in them. I don’t think my analysis of this time is different because the issues in the film are ageless. Aren’t people always fighting over property, since property has existed?

On the other hand, there is an attempt to hold onto something we cherish in these cities, that can get lost – and decisions are made that create these changes. Since I’ve finished the film, I’ve realized that it can be looked at as a metaphor for independent cinema. There is a space you try to hold onto, and it doesn’t make sense economically, but you believe in it.

HollywoodChicago.com: The psychology of gentrification plays out with such poignancy in "Little Men." Which part of that psychology do you feel will help people understand it that don't necessarily understand it?

Sachs: What I hope the film speaks to is the personal story. And how any shift in a neighborhood affects people and their lives. That's the drama of the film – out of these larger forces, both adult oriented and economically, help to destroy the quality of childhood and friendship between the two boys.

HollywoodChicago.com: There was a line that I immediately recognized as being from Ira Sachs. It was "thanks for being honest," from Tony to a girl who rejected him. Where do those lines come from, in the context of your own life?

Sachs: When working on and writing a film, I'm often more of a sponge than other times, aware of what's going on around me. I was walking through Soho one afternoon near my office, and I overheard a 20 year old man trying to hit on a 22 year old model. He was a plain-looking guy, and she of course was gorgeous.

They came to a corner, and he asked her out for coffee. The woman rejected him, and he said to her 'thanks for being honest.' I was thrown for him, but he had a great reply, and I was struck by that. By the way, the original title of the film was 'Thanks for Being Honest.'



Greg Kinnear Has a Moment in 'Little Men'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: I thought this was one of Greg Kinnear's finest performances. What did he know about the character that impressed you the most, and which scene does he use that knowledge the most?

Sachs: What he really understood about Brian, was that the character had just lost his father, and at the same time he was trying to become the man he thought he was suppose to be. Marking that throughout the course of the film, and where he shifts – getting uncharacteristically angry in a pivotal scene – is when he becomes most honest. He begins to say the things that he had avoided saying before.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your casting was so precise, and you used three lesser known actors – the two principle teenagers and Paulina García – in key roles. What was the process of finding the right fit for these roles, and was it a significant search?

Sachs: Paulina we actually wrote for, we had seen her in a film called 'Gloria,' a Chilean film from a couple years back. She won Best Actress for that role at the Berlin Film Festival. I knew that she pull off this tough, seemingly impenetrable woman who had a lot of depth and fear, plus Paulina and I agreed we didn't need to soften the character.

The boys, as a pair, was inspired by the girls in the 1960s film 'The World of Henry Orient.' I learned from that film that I didn't have to find the perfect pair. I needed to find two young guys who would hold interest and be original. Once I found them, I stopped. I didn't say, 'I need to see 10,000 more teenagers.' [laughs] I didn't feel anxious at all once I settled casting them.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is your third film in a row with co-writer Mauricio Zacharias. What does he give you as a writing partner that you think your perspective doesn't have?

Sachs: In our process, we sit around and talk about life and movies for a couple of weeks. Then we come up with an idea and a set of characters, and then Mauricio writes the first draft – the heavy lifting of a blank page. He has a level of craft that is not my strength. I have a

more conceptual hold on the film, and in the second draft I can find the cinematic nature in the story – I feel it in a different way. We collaborate well because we continue to find we share similar values, similar curiosity and we don't take it all so seriously. We're good family.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you think thematically 'Little Men' connects to your previous films about same sex relationships, even though 'Men' isn't necessarily about any character's sexual orientation?

Sachs: To come to change, there had to be conflict and pain. To bring it back to the 'Little Men,' I do leave Jake's orientation up in the air, but I hope that he doesn't have to experience the same pain as the teenage character in my first film [The Delta, 1996]. His sexuality was hidden and shameful, and I want Jake – whoever he becomes – to not have that pain.

HollywoodChicago.com: Of this roster of name actors you've worked with in the past nine years – Rip Torn, Pierce Brosnan, Chris Cooper, Patricia Clarkson, Rachel McAdams, Alfred Molina, John Lithgow and Marisa Tomei – which soul has lingered the most in your association, and why do think that happened?

Sachs: What is fascinating about that list, is all those actors played characters that are different than who I am – I've written more about people I know, than who I am personally. The distinction was Chris Cooper, who played a man with a conflict that I was struggling with at the time – he was a man in deceit. Another connection to an actor was Dina Korzun, who was the lead actress in 'Forty Shades of Blue.' My early films were about self discovery, and films of internal conflict. At that level, they were very personal.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your title is 'Little Men,' a variation of course of 'Little Women.' What do you think your film has in common with Louisa May Alcott's classic novel, either in theme, tone or plot element?



Michael Barbieri and Theo Taplitz in 'Little Men'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Sachs: I grew up loving the novel – its structure, patience, depth and beauty. The novel is very important to me, and I do love the young adult novels as a form and genre, because it has a purity of intention and heart. There are certain classic novels that tackle the stages of childhood and adolescence, and certainly 'Little Women' does that, in connection with my film.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the transition take place between the title 'Thanks for Being Honest' to 'Little Men'?

Sachs: In the editing phase, the 'Thanks for Being Honest' title started to feel too mental in a way. There was also a level of irony that didn't totally fit. There was a way in which my films begin, starting wide and very open. So with the title, I wanted to give the audience a clue that it was about the 'Little Men,' even as all the characters were little men.

HollywoodChicago.com: Just as an aside, we just had the 75th anniversary of the seminal film, 'Citizen Kane.' What is your opinion about that film, often called the greatest of all time?

Sachs: I happen to be talking about it a lot lately, because I'm working on a film about Montgomery Clift for HBO. It's a long form biography, going from when he was 14 years old to his death at 46. So I'm looking at films like Kane, 'Raging Bull' and 'Goodfellas.' Those three films have been influential in a sense in that they raise the bar high, and manage to do a lot of things in the passage of time that I hope our Clift biography will be able to do.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is your reaction to praise? Your films have been praised as 'the best American film' of their particular years,

and have ended up on several critic’s top ten lists. How do you, as a creative soul, accept or deny praise?

Sachs: The praise helps on a deep level, which gives you the grounding that encourages you to trust yourself. On another level, each film is a risk, and the praise doesn’t save you from that risk.

“Little Men” continues its nationwide release in Chicago on September 2nd. Featuring Greg Kinnear, Jennifer Ehle, Alfred Molina, Talia Balsam, Paulina García, Michael Barbieri and Theo Taplitz. Written by Ira Sachs and Mauricio Zacharias. Directed by Ira Sachs. Rated “PG”



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