

Excellent 'Little Men' Exposes Humanity Disrupted

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 6, 2016 - 4:29pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Deep down, because of our profound connection to what makes us human, we attempt to interpret the doing of the right thing. But in a society of property, somebody lives on it and somebody is run off it. This theme, combined with an adolescent friendship, emerge in “Little Men.”

This film is the seventh directed by Ira Sachs, who has such a delicate touch with his human stories. The way he brings these characters to life – with co-writer Mauricio Zacharias – is different than any contemporary director. He has a realization on how human beings tick, what thrills and disappoints them, and he is able to guide them through that arc in often symbolic stories. “Little Men” seems like a simple tale of impending gentrification in Brooklyn, but it really becomes a struggle between father and son, each going through profound life transitions. The films of Ira Sachs generate empathy – both for the audience and from the players in the screenplays – and target the implications of living within those understandings.

Brian (Greg Kinnear) moves to Brooklyn from Manhattan, with his wife Kathy (Jennifer Ehle) and son Jake (Theo Taplitz). Brian’s father has died, and has left him a building in the borough, which has an attached dress shop run by Leonor (Paulina García). The new owner finds out that the dressmaker has been paying minimal rent, and is forced to triple it, which is still below the market value of the burgeoning neighborhood.



Tony (Michael Barbieri) and Jake (Theo Taplitz) Make a Connection in 'Little Men'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

In the meantime Jake has met Tony (Michael Barbieri), a brash drama student who happens to be Leonor's son. Their friendship develops to brotherhood, which throws a wrench into the negotiations that Brian and Leonor are going through. The adults are spoiling the connection between the teenagers, and the father and son in the middle must come to terms with what is breaking.

Greg Kinnear, who began his career as a soft romantic type, has distinguished himself by taking on challenging roles like in "Autofocus" (2002) and "Little Miss Sunshine." This is his best performance to date, as he wears the divisiveness of the circumstance like a hair shirt. He looks perpetually tired in the piece, as if he's not getting enough sleep, and he nails the aspect of a middle aged man forced to make some life decisions that he had been avoiding to that point. There is a key scene with Jake towards the end that works as if he's advising himself.

The counterpoint to Kinnear's Brian is Chilean actress Paulina García's performance as Leonor. There is a touch of bitterness in her portrayal, as if she wants to twist the knife into the arrogance of Brian and his sister Audrey (Talia Balsam) regarding the situation. She has weariness herself, but it is the pressure of economic strain, a different kind of desperation.

Another highlight of casting was the two main teenagers. Theo Taplitz as Jake and Michael Barbieri as Tony have an authentic adolescent relationship. The "best friend" scenario during those years can be strong as blood, and the two have a chemistry that makes the adult issues surrounding them that much more difficult to take. There is a magnificent scene of Barbieri in an acting class, and the kid shows a raw performance courage that bodes well for his future.



Brian (Greg Kinnear) Has a Moment in 'Little Men'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

That scene is counterpointed by Kinnear's Brian, who doesn't have privy to it, and denies Tony's talent to his son (who isn't really privy to it either). It is one of the difficult moments of parenting, since Brian is essentially lying to his son, although only the audience knows it. These are the type of foibles that are positioned in the films of Ira Sachs, who has a keen sense of the human condition.

The title is ironic, as all the characters in their way are "Little Men." In the process of learning what we need to know, when we need to know it, those lessons often make us feel very small, and it's the truth gained from those moments that keep expanding our ever-evolving education called life.

[CLICK HERE \[17\]](#) for an interview with director Ira Sachs of "Little Men," by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com.

"Little Men" opened 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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