

a childhood

A film by **PHILIPPE CLAUDEL**



Les Films du Losange presents

**Alexi
Mathieu**

**Angelica
Sarre**

**Pierre
Deladonchamps**

**Jules
Gauzelin**

**Patrick
d'Assunção**

a childhood

A film by
Philippe Claudel



France • 1h40 • 2015 • 1.85 - 2K • Color • Sound 5.1

Photos can be downloaded at www.filmsdulosange.fr

International sales **Les Films du Losange**

► **Bérénice Vincent – Head of Sales**
+ 33 6 63 74 69 10 / b.vincent@filmsdulosange.fr

► **Marine Goulois – Festivals & Sales**
+ 33 6 84 21 74 53 / m.goulois@filmsdulosange.fr

► **Lise Zipci – Servicing & Library Sales**
+ 33 6 75 13 05 75 / l.zipci@filmsdulosange.fr

► **Jules Chevalier – Administration & Finance**
+ 33 1 44 43 87 14 / j.chevalier@filmsdulosange.fr



Synopsis

A small industrial town in eastern France, torn between inner city and countryside, canals and overgrown orchards. Jimmy, who has already repeated two years at school, will begin 6th grade in September, but before that there's the long summer vacation with the boredom and solitude it entails. Jimmy's half-brother, Kevin, is 8.

They both live with their mother, Pris, 30, who regained custody of the boys after a stretch in prison. Her partner, Duke, is content with his miserable existence, getting by on nickel-and-dime dope deals, petty theft and Pris' welfare checks.

The apartment where they all live is mostly a party pad with drugs and alcohol in abun-

-dance. Against this backdrop, the children raise themselves as best they can and, despite his young age, Jimmy often has to behave as head of the household, cooking and cleaning—the responsible big brother taking over duties neglected by his mother and flaky stepfather.

It hurts Jimmy to see his mother suffering, so completely under the influence of a man who is as mixed-up and irresponsible as she is, and who keeps her dependent on him and

the drugs he supplies. There is a sense of brutal violence slowly simmering within the boy, but one can only wonder against whom or what it can be unleashed.

All the summer light and singular beauty of the natural and industrial wastelands where he wanders cannot ease Jimmy's pain and rage. And as summer meanders indifferently on, the ingredients of a tragedy fall inexorably into place—a tragedy that sees the explosive reaction of innocence and violence.



Interview with Philippe Claudel

/ *A Childhood* marks a new direction in your filmmaking career. Why this desire to reshuffle the deck after three features?

I've come to realize, with regard to my novels or films, that I often create *against* what I have done before. *Before the winter chill* played on certain classical movie tropes. Through the casting (Kristin Scott Thomas, Leila Bekhti, Daniel Auteuil and Richard Berry), the CinemaScope format, the geometry of the framing, the aesthetics of the lighting and sets, and the fluidity of the camera movements, everything told the audience that it was watching a constructed object, a codified specimen of cinematic art in the most accepted sense. After that movie, I quickly wanted to move onto something else, in terms of the process as much as the finished product. Before I even chose my subject, I was determined to parse the crew to the bare essential in order to reduce technical restrictions. I wanted to be freer, more responsive and flexible in my practice, and more mobile between locations. I decided to make technical issues a factor of artistic aims, not the other way around. Also, there was the desire to work with unknown or little known faces in order to confront the audience with a world close to their own, with which they could easily relate and in which they saw people they might run into in their daily lives. Also, for a long time, I'd been

dreaming of filming the small town where I was born and where I live—a singular town that is half-industrial and half-rural, and whose sociological makeup offers an insight into contemporary France. To make it happen, I had to feel supported and understood. I was lucky enough to meet Margaret Menegoz, without whom the film would not have seen the light of day. Nobody ever gives enough credit to the important job a producer does for a director, to the trust and support that he or she provides, enabling the director to hang on in there and keep moving forward.

/ You were born in Dombasle-sur-Meurthe, you grew up there and you still live there. Besides your emotional ties to the town, what makes it cinematically interesting for you?

Dombasle is an industrial town on the farthest outskirts of Nancy, almost in the countryside. One of its characteristics is that, from the late 19th century onward, it grew up around a large factory that produced and still produces sodium carbonate. The Belgian company that owns it, Solvay, had a paternalistic philosophy that involved building houses for all its employees—factory workers and managing director alike—as well as schools, a library, hospital, sports field and community hall. They all have the particularity of being red brick buildings, which are common in



Photo © Philippe Claudel

Belgium or northern France but very unusual for the Lorraine region. What surprises people nowadays is that many streets have a row of terraced workers' houses—like the one Jimmy lives in—on one side, opposite detached houses—like the one where Jimmy attends a birthday party—that were built for engineers and managers. In actual fact, the two locations are barely ten meters apart. It's impossible nowadays to find different social classes living so close together. For a long time now, the geography of our living spaces has been dependent on the geography of revenue. Another of Dombasle's curiosities is the way nature overlaps into the city. I don't think you ever see landscapes like that in movies. This is a town where you move seamlessly from a field full of cows to an industrial warehouse, and from a bucolic riverbank or canal to the monstrous, cacophonous hulk of a kind of blast furnace. Nature is everywhere, not only

in the gardens and allotments of the working-class neighborhoods where we shot the movie and whose dereliction speaks to the end of a particular social model and way of life. Once again, the town was dealt a unique hand that you don't see nowadays, when landscapes are either industrial or post-industrial or rural. Here, everything coexists, cohabits and overlaps. Visually, of course, it's marvelous to exploit that, while using it to enrich Jimmy's psychology and events in his life. I should point out that *A Childhood* can also be seen, sadly and indirectly, as a documentary because the neighborhood where Jimmy lives, including the gardens, was demolished and flattened immediately after the shoot.

/ *A Childhood* is the portrait of a kid roughly 12 years of age, who is reunited with his mother, Pris, from whom he had been parted. She has shackled up with a guy, Duke, who

doesn't really help with family harmony. How did you dream up the character of Jimmy?

I really wanted to explore how innocence, joy and carefree impulses that are habitually part of childhood collide with the violence of psychologically grueling situations, or orders, requests and choices that a child should not have to face. Jimmy is torn by conflicting forces. He wants to be a child but he can't really because he is burdened by responsibilities that are not of his age. He takes care of his little brother and household chores, like shopping and cooking; he goes to school; he looks out for his mother and watches first-hand the adults' downward slide; he is subjected to the authority and mood swings of a stepfather he doesn't get on with. All without really rebelling or expressing what he feels inside. How does he react to the situation? Is that rage bubbling up inside or fear? How does he put up with it? How does he cope, especially when summer

brings profound solitude and an unbearable lengthening of his days? Nothing is explicitly said or explained. It's up to the audience to relate to Jimmy, to see things through his eyes, to try to understand his way of thinking, to assemble the various pieces of the puzzle and to look under the surface of the characters, including his. I always give the audience an important role to play in my films, and perhaps even more so in this one.

/ It would have been easy to appeal to the audience's sympathy but you go out of your way to avoid sentimentality. What limits did you set yourself?

It was very important for me to make a bittersweet movie, avoiding the purely melodramatic register that I explored in *I've loved you so long*. I wanted it to be a chronicle—social and poetic, restrained and violent. Even though Jimmy never smiles, he's not a Dickensian child. True, he lives on the margins



of society, in his own little world, but he has moments of happiness and elements of stability around him: his little brother, who offers insouciance and love; his grandmother; the elderly neighbor; the tennis coach; the school-teacher, who has grasped who Jimmy is and what he's going through, but can't do much to help. The powerlessness of well-meaning adults is one of the more tragic facets of the film. Jimmy truly is alone. I wanted to capture that tipping-point when a child can go in any direction—become a good kid or turn very bad. Picturing the character in future years, we don't know, I don't know, what will become of Jimmy. That ignorance, that indecision, is what is so exciting. Likewise, I really enjoyed putting together the school scenes that show Jimmy with other children. Who are they? In my town, in primary school, even in fifth grade, the class is another lie. Children from poor backgrounds and middle-class kids mix without their differences being too striking or visible. How many Jimmies are there? How can you spot them? I know the children in the school scenes. They live near me, in my neighborhood. I assure you, some of them have even tougher lives than Jimmy, yet it doesn't show on screen. The surface is smooth and beautiful. It's terrible when you think about it.

/ Love isn't absent from Jimmy's life. What is his bond with his mother? More than that of an older son?

I wanted to confront this withdrawn child with different forms of love. There's the little brother who shows tender affection. There's the grandmother who clearly loves him, who looked after him and who is mad at herself for

not being able to take him with her on vacation. There's also little Lison, in his class, who makes Jimmy's heart skip a beat all of a sudden. And then there's the elderly neighbor, the tight-lipped grandfather figure the boy would like to get to know better but dare not. With Pris, his mother, his priority is getting to know her again. After years of drifting and absence, this overage teen has to come to terms with her role as a mother but seems almost incapable of doing so. They love each other—that's not the issue—but they need to find ways of making that love a tangible part of their daily lives.

/ How would you define Jimmy's background?

Pris and Duke share a sense of not having the life they deserve, but that's true of a lot of people who don't necessarily turn bitter. Duke lashes out at politicians, whom he blames for anything and everything. Fair enough, the recent behavior of some of them and the ensuing scandals support his arguments. I was seeking that confrontation between a child, whose life and future a politician is supposed to support and prepare, and the disgraceful actions and lies of that politician.

/ Nature plays an important role in the film, bringing to mind your book *Parfums*, which mentions evocative odors and childhood memories. Is the bucolic countryside we see on screen also where you grew up?

All the locations are. Curiously, the countryside hasn't changed much. The trails, hills, fields and copses where I go walking are those of my childhood. In the scene where the boys drink water from a faucet in the cemetery, my parents' house is in the background. They've passed on now, but that was my childhood



home. The cherry tree where the boys swipe fruit was planted by my father. The whole film contains very personal material, constant echoes of my life, past and present. But, once again, the nature we see on screen as some kind of garden of Eden would have no value or meaning to me without Dombasle's industrial heritage. The primeval world rubs shoulders with the architecture of the world of work—factories, pipes, trucks, warehouses, gangways, slag heaps—which some people find ugly, sordid and invasive. Together, the countryside and the sounds and images of the factory and its environs structure the film and metaphorically bear witness to Jimmy's life. He copes

with its violence and draws strength from the water, flowers, fields and paths that he constantly rides his bike down. That bike is an avatar for the lonesome cowboy's horse. When Jimmy climbs on it, he is master of his freedom. With a few turns of the pedals, he chooses his destiny and whisks himself away into the heart of a soothing, majestic, infinite, primeval place where anything is possible. He accesses a dimension of the world that transcends and reassures him. I enjoyed counterbalancing the dark complexity of the people with happy glimpses of nature and, similarly, of the crowd at the outdoor festival, where people are laughing and dancing.



/ Jimmy is in practically every scene. Was it hard finding a young actor to take on that responsibility?

I wanted the actor to be a local boy, aged around 13, but not too tall and looking younger than that. With Claire Lefèvre, one of my former film students who helps me with casting, we put the word out through local networks, radio and TV. We received about a hundred applications. The child's face and voice had to be as I imagined them. Based on photos, I selected a group who provided filmed presentations and then a short list for screen tests. One day, maybe two months before we started shooting,

Alexi Mathieu, turned up. I had initially eliminated him due to a haircut on his photo that totally changed his face and expression. My wife, whose advice I seek constantly, convinced me to meet him. That day, my daughter was filming the screen tests. When Alexi finished, my daughter and I glanced at each other in amazement. We'd found our Jimmy. It was unbelievably obvious. Funnily enough, he lives barely five kilometers from my house.

/ Pierre Deladonchamps was born in Nancy, in the Lorraine region, and won the Best Newcomer César award for his performance

in Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the lake*. Too good to be true, perhaps?

I thought Guiraudie's film was marvelous, but I had no idea that Pierre was from Lorraine. We met at the Ghent festival, where I was presenting *Before the winter chill*. At dinner, with Pierre, my wife suddenly murmured in my ear, "He's Duke!" She was absolutely right. I asked him to do a screen test just for the pleasure of filming him, but my mind was made up. Pierre is a very talented actor who, if he takes his chances and makes the right choices, could have a fantastic career. He can act anything. Seriously. His physical transfor-

-mations are astonishing. I wanted him to be a snake, a razor clam, a shark, a kind of gleaming blade. I was also delighted to give the role of the schoolteacher to Patrick d'Assunção, who co-starred in *Stranger by the lake* with Pierre. Along with Angelica Sarre and Fayçal Benhamed, who plays Mouss, they are the only professional actors in *A Childhood*. All the other characters are played by the inhabitants of Dombasle and the surrounding area. Angelica was a wonderful discovery. As a young actress leaving drama school, she contacted me a few years ago, but I wasn't able to meet her. I kept her photos, however, and when I wrote the part of Pris, I immediately pictured Angelica's face. She has no hangups about how she looks on screen, which isn't the case with all actresses, some of whom are haunted by their image. Sometimes Angelica is a radiant, sunny Pris; sometimes she verges on ugliness. It all contributes to the veracity of the character and her intensity.

/ Did you find the freedom you were seeking as a director?

Yes, absolutely. A small, mobile crew, minimal technical constraints, a flexible and humble cast, faces we're not tired of seeing, non-professional actors driven by a fun experience—it all enabled me to devote myself to directing with the simplicity and appetite of when I was starting out, long ago, experimenting with the possibilities of film with fellow students. Before the shoot, I warned my DP Denis Lenoir that there would be no tracks, cranes or dollies, just a camera supported by an arm connected to a harness worn by the camera operator to avoid major jolts. We used a shopping cart, a Citroën Méhari offroader and



a wheelchair for the very occasional tracking shots. And I went back to a 1.85 aspect ratio, which I'm particularly fond of because it is more natural than CinemaScope, closer to the our eyes' vision, more human and respectful of the characters. The shooting schedule was adaptable and the script likewise. I'd spend weekends revisiting the locations and writing new scenes, because everything was on my doorstep. And, for the first time in my films, editing was an extraordinarily creative phase because we could do anything we wanted — dismantle, reassemble, organize, disorganize, reorganize—with total freedom. It was hard work, exciting and unpredictable, and I felt like I had a true accomplice in Isabelle Devineck, who has lots of experience and flair and has worked with directors specializing in comedies, such as Julie Delpy and Pierre Salvadori. With a personality very different from mine, she made a real contribution. We edited the movie just across the street from my house. (I should

point out that, in the whole creative process from writing to mixing the film, only five weeks' work were in Paris.) Every day, we reassessed where we were going. On my previous movies, the editing followed the script. In this case, we constantly had to find the right structure, balance and, above all, rhythm, so that we never slip into boredom or, on the other hand, lose the complexity of the story. A few frames here or there made a radical difference.

/ You usually take your inspiration for a film from a piece of music or song. Was that the case this time?

Yes. While I was writing, I was carried along by Fleetwood Mac's *Beautiful Mind*, which I intended to use over the closing images and end credits. But in pre-production, while scouting locations and picturing how I would shoot each scene, I wondered what the inner music of this boy, the hidden voice of this cowboy on a bike, would be. That dreamlike, American



approach made me return to an artist I really like, Ray LaMontagne, a kind of heir to Dylan and Neil Young, a songwriter whose voice makes you feel he is singing just for you, for your ear, with beautiful and slightly melancholy melodies and remarkable arrangements. It became obvious to me that this was Jimmy's inner world. I made my choice and some of the scenes, such as the long bike ride, the Crow Island scene or the slow dance with Pris, were shot, or edited, with specific Ray LaMontagne tracks in mind.

/ For the first time, you appear on screen. Consciously or not, is this a way of marking the film down as very personal or even autobiographical?

I used to act in shorts we made as students, because we rotated every role on set, but I didn't enjoy it. I screen-tested a friend for the part of the tennis coach, but while we were shooting, I gradually realized how personal the



film was. Not in terms of the story—I didn't have such a tough childhood—but in terms of locations, language, accent, dialogue and lots of other details. Directly or indirectly, wherever or whatever we were shooting, it was about me. The tennis court scene at the very end, when the coach tells Jimmy that he used to hang around the courts too, as a kid, is totally autobiographical. I used to hover around the courts, really wanting to play, in the same way and at the same age as I began to hover around movies in the hope of being a filmmaker one day. The line, "Now I get to play," is a metaphor almost. I never dared to dream of making movies and, today, I get to be the guy behind the camera. Somewhere along the line, I understood that this boy was me and it had to be me reaching out to him at the end. To invite him onto the court, into life and into cinema. To come full circle. ■

Interview by Laurence Halloche / June 2015



Philippe Claudel

Filmography

(Director)

2015 - **A childhood** • 2013 - **Before the winter chill** • 2011 - **Silence of love** • 2008 - **I've loved you so long** (*César 2009 Best First Film / Best Supporting Actress / Bafia 2009 Best Non English speaking Film / Golden Globes 2009 : Nominations for Best Foreign Film and Best Actress / César 2009 : 6 nominations*)

(Scriptwriter)

2013 - **Before the winter chill** • 2011 - **Silence of love** • 2008 - **I've loved you so long** • 2005 - **Grey Souls** by Yves Angelo • 2002 - **On the Tips of Her Fingers** by Yves Angelo

Bibliography

Philippe Claudel is a member of the Goncourt Academy since January 2012. He wrote more than thirty books among which:

2003 - **Grey Souls** (*Renaudot Award*) • 2006 - **Monsieur Linh and His Child** (*European Euregio Prize*) • 2007 - **Brodeck's Report** (*High Schools Goncourt Prize*)

Cast

Jimmy **Alexi Mathieu** • Pris **Angelica Sarre** • Duke **Pierre Deladonchamps** • Kévin **Jules Gauzelin** • Schoolteacher **Patrick d'Assunção** • Mouss **Fayssal Benbahmed** • Lila **Catherine Matisse** • Lison **Lola Dubois** • Elderly neighbor **Gérard Barbonnet** • Ben **Jean-Paul Labé** • Tennis coach **Philippe Claudel** • Supermarket security guard **Christophe Ragonnet** • Lison's mother **Catherine Zahner-Cloarec** • Mouloud **David Finance** • Mouloud's girlfriend **Fanny Gourieux** • Post Office employee **Dominique Longeaux** • Post Office supervisor **Emmanuelle Chevillard** • Old lady lottery **Jacqueline Prévot** • Social worker **Caroline Raybaudi** • Butcher **Daniel Haffner** • Tennis player **Christian Magnani** • Supermarket checkout clerk **Isabelle Bourmault** • Hypermarket checkout clerk **Laurence Magron** • Fruit & veg seller **Hassan Fellah** • Police lieutenant **Nicolas Bourion**

Crew

Written and directed by **Philippe Claudel** • Produced by **Margaret Menegoz** • Artistic consultant **Dominique Kucharzewski** • Film editor **Isabelle Devinck** • D.O.P **Denis Lenoir AFC, ASC.** • Production designer **Samuel Deshors** • Sound **Pierre Lenoir, Stéphane Brunclair** • Rerecording mixer **Anne le Champion** • 1st Assistant **Dominique Delany** • Production manager **Philippe Saal** • In coproduction with **France 3 Cinéma** • With the participation of **Canal+, Ciné+, France Télévisions, Le Centre du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée** et de **La Région Lorraine** • Distribution France and International Sales **Les Films du Losange**

© 2015 Les Films du Losange – France 3 Cinéma



