

STELION FILMS

GROUNDS OF HOPE

A French contemporary western movie.

JULIEN
BARBIER

JULIEN
KITITI

SÉBASTIEN
CORONA

STÉPHANIE
SCHOONJANS

written and directed by Lionel Bernardin

STARRING JULIEN BARBIER, JULIEN KITITI, SÉBASTIEN CORONA, STÉPHANIE SCHOONJANS,
JEAN-PIERRE MESNARD, GUILLAUME DELANQUE, CLÉMENT LAGUARDE, MICKAËL PANNIER, HÉRVÉ FONTENY, AMRA DEDIĆ AND SURAJIYA PUNYAN, ANANDRUDH
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ROMAIN VALLADE 1st ASSISTANT DIRECTOR GILLES BOTINEAU 2ND DAMIEN DEWET PRODUCTION DESIGNER JONATHAN CHARBRAUD EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
PRODUCED BY STÉPHANIE SCHOONJANS STELION FILMS WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY LIONEL BERNARDIN

STORYLINE

In a small rural town, Alex, a former professional boxer, lives as a worker for a concrete materials company. One night, chased by armed men, his twin sister breaks into his home with a migrant and his daughter. Alex, forced by the situation, helps to hide them, unaware that they are keenly sought. The spiral starts. With no choice and under financial pressure, he starts competing in illegal boxing fights.



With very current problems, this movie is about the « crime of solidarity » in France, the trafficking of migrants and how some rural areas are desolate. Caught in a difficult situation, the characters evolve in a poetic atmosphere that contrasts with the brutal reality of their struggles.

DIRECTOR

Lionel Bernardin was born in Angoulême, France, in 1981. Graduated in image and communication, he began as composer for short films and worked with several Hip-Hop artists from the New York scene during the early 2000s. He started to direct some music videos and attracted to fiction, he wrote and directed his first short movie in 2009. He then worked on 4 others short films, including the original music, composed and played by himself.

His short film, "Financial Confessions", was awarded by the famous French director Cédric Klapisch, at the Sundance Channel Shorts in 2015 (Paris, France). This short film will be selected at the Sacramento International Film Festival, the Bordeaux European Short Film Festival, the Francophone Film Festival of Angoulême, the International Short Film Festival Combat, then in screenings and debates on "the financial crisis seen by the cinema" at La Sorbonne University, Paris.

In 2018, Lionel Bernardin wrote his first feature film, "A Terre Promise / Grounds Of Hope » which will be shot during August and December of 2019. The editing process was done during the covid pandemic, forcing teams to adapt to the situation, rethinking the workflow to allow the creative process not to be stopped by the national lockdown in France.



« The story is about a man who lives in a rural, working-class community under economic pressure. Through the destiny of this man, the movie tells us about economic and social topics such as poverty in rural areas, but also of the conditions of those people who came to France, leaving everything behind to flee their country, and who are named "migrants". I wanted to speak from the point of view of the welcoming factions in France, of those people who open their homes and about the risk from "crime of solidarity". Something very intimate, very close to the real working class people.

This film is part of a naturalistic cinema movement, that centers its narrative on one destiny, on a personal and intimate story, a universal dramatic force. I wanted to express a vision of cinema with Nature as a real character, changing mood during the movie, by filming an agricultural region whose landscapes are crossed by a river. It was important for me to find the balance between the individual, his social context and his natural environment of life.

Part of the story came from the several trials in France, for "crimes of solidarity", people who chose to help "migrants", and who have been prosecuted for reaching out. Before writing the script, I spoke with a journalist who had been investigating for months a prostitution network of isolated minors, all from the recent wave of immigration. All this testimony touched me deeply. Just before writing « Grounds Of Hope », I co-wrote a biopic about the youth of a French naturalized boxing champion, from a middle Eastern country. I thought to associate these two settings within a new ensemble, anchored in a rural and working class environment.

To start the story, I needed a set. The scouting took us to the north of the Charente (France). This region, which has experienced significant rural desertification, was the perfect place. When we arrived, I saw a strong visual potential and real possibilities to develop the on-set environment I looked for in this film. I went there, spent time with local people, I was able to understand the socio-economic mechanisms of the region. From there, I began to feed my characters and draw their contours. I created a dramaturgic link between all this material, and that link was Love. That one from a man who tries to face grief for the last four years, day by day. This is the very deep heart of the film, in this intimate, impossible to heal, this absolute pain and this bravery you must have for living with this. And then comes a new encounter, facing difficulties to open your mind again to another people, then finally, when the barriers have fallen, a link so natural, so universal. »

INTERVIEW

LIONEL BERNARDIN, WRITER, DIRECTOR

Grounds of Hope is your first feature film, how did you get the idea for the script?

I wanted to write a story about the bond between human beings, the one that goes beyond the borders, these fictitious barriers that we have created. After five short films, I was starting to feel really cramped in this format. Writing the script of Grounds of Hope gave me the space to develop a story with characters and enough time to evolve them.

To explain the title, Grounds of Hope, refers to an elsewhere, the peace of a country that often presents a less welcoming face that he had hoped for. The word «Grounds» echoes the more fictional part of the film, the world of illegal boxing matches that take place in an unknown, rural world. It was quite natural for me to integrate boxing in to my first feature film, having already worked on the subject in a previous script, and it is clearly a direct metaphor for the struggle of migrants and many other people in their everyday lives. Taking hits, having the courage to get up and fight again. Finally, I cannot conceive of writing about human beings without Nature. Luminous, radiant, it occupies an omnipresent place in the story. We create a deep contrast between the life of Alex Dussart, sad and lonely, with the vegetation, the river and the wildlife that surrounds him all the time.

Writer, director, co-producer, editor, composer, how did you manage to do everything at once?

I was drawn to filmmaking by the music. I always composed the soundtrack of my short films, and I did the same thing with this feature. It is something very natural in my working process. I compose the music as I work through the editing process. I edit the «raw» sequence until it works, then I create a base of sound ambiances. The music comes to underline the feeling, if necessary. A feature film production in a small economic context, pushing us to be versatile and creative! We have to do as well, or better, with much less. In this context, bringing together the technical and artistic teams, managing the logistical aspect for about thirty days of shooting, is a really big daily challenge. For example, in order to limit travel, we found the majority of the sets within a fifteen kilometer radius of the production HQ, and it was also the main character's kitchen. We can see our HQ in several sequences of the movie. It's a great example of creativity on the logistical and artistic level.

I launched the pre-production six months before the shooting in January: scouting location, building the production team, casting... When Stéphanie Schoonjans came into the production in the spring, everything accelerated. As Mark Twain said, 'They didn't know it was impossible, so they did it.' I often say that filmmaking is a team sport. Without the motivation of all the production crew, the film would not exist.

In addition to this, there is the shared goal of the entire team to produce and participate in the making of a first feature

film. A challenge that led us to make a major collective effort to allow the film to be produced.

About casting, do you have a particular method?

I search for sincerity in my work. The choice of having professional actors, playing alongside people who interpret their own roles, their daily lives, is an illustration of this search for authenticity. Then, the choice of actors comes partly from my professional network and partly from a classic and sometimes 'wild' casting process.

How did the shooting go?

On the set, as fatigue increased, so did the pressure. The script was reviewed every night with the production team for partial adaptations. This allowed me to stick as much as possible to the reality of the shoot and to the characters that were coming to life. Working on live material means accepting that the lines move in real time, even during the shooting. On the other hand, it brings a much more organic look and that's what I wanted above all. When we shot the very last sequences in December, after the main shooting period in August, the crew had settled down, there was more serenity and fluidity. I take this as a very good sign for my next feature, we have felt that something positive has occurred between all of us, and I want to capitalize on this.

It was the first time I worked with Romain Vallade, the director of photography. I had particularly liked his work

when he was based in Senegal. I gave him references from Jeff Nichols, Terrence Malick, David Lowery and Clint Eastwood. Our many exchanges allowed us to lay the foundations for the relationship we developed on set. I am very pleased with the photography, which was further enhanced by the work of Valentin Damon during the color grading. The organic rendering that I wanted is very present in the image; you can feel the light, the heat, the humidity, all those atmospheres, everything is there.

The large landscapes, the bar, the pickup, the swamps, some of the film's settings remind us an American aesthetic...

Yes, absolutely, I spent a lot of time looking for very inspiring and evocative locations, which could inspire the audience and also propose references that I wanted to play with in the story. It is also a way to communicate with the audience even if I don't see them directly.

The old pickup truck and the great landscapes play with a road movie aesthetic, all concentrated in one lost corner. I liked the idea of visually enriching a forsaken place, which at first glance is not particularly attractive. At the same time, I wanted to put Nature in the foreground, it was a very strong desire on my part. I worked on the visual metaphor, between arid landscapes, the river, the swamps and the evolution of the different characters.

Is there a very special memory during the shooting?

I remember a nice one, the sequence in the bar. It combined a transition from day to night in the same shot, with an important and very dense dialogue scene. A real human choreography, artistic and technical, which introduces Azari, the villain of the story.

Tell us about the soundtrack... you composed and played it?

Music is an oasis for me in this desert of hard work. On set, I had my acoustic guitar with me, at the production office. In the evening working on the next day's cut, playing a little guitar in the spirit of the scenes we were going to shoot, helped me to concentrate on visualizing the shots, positioning the camera, etc. The main theme of the movie was born at the HQ, during a late work session with the production crew. During the more in-depth research on the music and atmosphere I wanted, I had in mind something both acoustic and very textured. Some of the sounds were totally created to have something unique, used throughout the film. In the end, the original soundtrack of Grounds of Hope is a balance between acoustic music and very textured electronic arrangements.

What do you like about working on thriller genre?

It's a very rich genre to create a set, a storyline and characters that have something to develop in depth. It is also a universe

in which you can work on many themes, which allows the director an interesting freedom during the writing process.

There is a political aspect in this film, is this a personal conviction that you expose?

Yes, it's a film based on my own convictions. I conceive my work as a writer and director as a way to talk about subjects that touch me personally, and that often raise a societal question. If that makes it a political movie, why not, everyone can bring his own classification. My objective here is not political, but I do want to propose a reflection on what is happening within society and create a debate around it. I can't be insensitive to certain subjects that are staring me in the face.

The «crime of solidarity» is like a denial of humanity to me. These people who have reached out and helped «migrants» have had to face prison sentences and months of legal proceedings. Grounds of Hope is not about this kind of story. This was not its purpose, but I did want to use it to raise the issues of conflict and develop my own story by showing how two people, who apparently have nothing in common, can become very close.

There is another subject in the film that could be qualified in the same way, it is the environmental cause. It is less direct, but the way of personifying Nature and bringing it into the story as a real character is in itself a strong act. I would like

to specify one important thing, the production has worked very hard to reduce as much as possible its carbon footprint (waste sorting, composting, transportation, proximity of the shooting locations, catering with local products and without plastic...) and part of the profits of the film are given to an association that replants trees in areas destroyed by storms or fires.

About the boxing fights now, how did you approach them?

I took a two-step approach. Firstly, I worked with four hands on the script of a biopic of a French boxer of foreign origin. I spent a lot of time dissecting his fights, his boxing, his way of moving... For various reasons, the project remained at the script stage, but with this knowledge, I naturally integrated boxing into Grounds of Hope.

And it must be said, it's a really big challenge to shoot boxing fights. We have behind us movies like «Fight club», «Snatch», «De rouille et d'os», it's no joke! But it's very stimulating, even more on a first feature film. The three fights in the movie were choreographed with professional boxers. I really wanted three different styles, and not to have the same three fights. The first one is more aerial, the second one is very Anglo-Saxon boxing style and the third is the wildest, the hardest, closer to street boxing.

You talk about a central character and not a main

character, how do you mark this difference?

Alexandre Dussart is the heart of the story, but I invite the audience to share a part of his life. In our daily lives, everything is about interactions between us, I had to show that in the movie, but only on a chosen lifetime part. That's why we see Eva, Alex's twin sister, with her own fights for real people against administration, trafficking by local mafia, of course Tainawo and his daughter facing new obstacles in France, and finally, Jean-Marie, who runs this old American bar, totally out of time. A wise old man from a family that has faced a tragedy that has changed everything.

How did you work with actresses and actors?

Before the shooting, we have long conversations about the global atmosphere of the movie. It's something very important to me. The actors need to truly understand the world in which their characters live.

During this period we talk about the script and I take time to answer all the questions they have about it. We define the contours of their respective characters. Then, we meet a few months before the shooting to shoot some test sequences. It was the right time to create a good dynamic all together. The actors can meet each other and work together for the first time, in a relaxed but studious atmosphere.

On set, we quickly put in place the required mechanisms. I give the actors space to work on their characters, I listen carefully to what they propose on the first takes and then

I readjust when necessary. I don't like to multiply the takes, I want the most spontaneous result possible. Sometimes we have to find an emotion that needs to be shaped by the camera and the number of takes, it is important to be attentive to it and take the time to allow this emotion to appear in the image.

Finally, I often integrate movement in the background, which is an additional difficulty in the choreography of the artistic and technical teams, but it brings something I appreciate.

As the shooting progressed, we adapted our work process with Gilles Botineau, the first assistant director, to make our installations more fluid and to give priority to spending time talking with the actors during set-up.

The film opens and ends with a wolf, what meaning do you give to this animal?

You have to see the whole movie to understand this image. Without revealing too much, this wolf made a huge impression on me, the image was engraved in my head instantly, it was something very strong. It was the perfect metaphor for Alexandre Dussart's life. The animal's muzzle is marked with several scars, he is old, he seems tired by life, he is so expressive... It was perfect for the opening of the movie, and I attach significant importance to this image, as both a viewer and director.

It is also the very concrete image of the metaphor «man is a wolf to man», which is widely developed in the story. Then, the

wolf has a real role, we find it in the Indian legend written for the film, told by Awan (played by Clément Lagouarde, himself chief of the Natchitoches tribe in Louisiana, USA), and then it returns on different parts, but I'd rather let you watch the film... To finish on this wolf, we have used stock archive and on set we have filmed with two Czechoslovakian wolf-dogs, it was an absolutely magnificent moment shared with them. It is an experience that I wish to live again on my next film.

Can you tell us more about this next movie?

I've started writing an investigative thriller about industrial level pollution of a river during the first Covid-19 lockdown in France. I am working on the correlation between the suspicious suicide of a whistleblower, a police investigation and the consequences inside a family whose wealth has been built on an inglorious colonial past. For the moment, the story takes place mostly around Bordeaux (France), with some connections to New Orleans (USA).





INSTANT WORDS

JULIEN BARBIER, ACTOR

In addition to his performance with the character of Alex Dussart in Grounds of Hope, Julien Barbier has already played in about fifteen films and series, whether for Jean Becker in «Le Collier Rouge» and «Bienvenue Parmi Nous», or for the Canal+ serie «Baron noir» and for Arte TV serie «Ainsi soient-ils.»

«What I liked about the script is that there is not just one central story that revolves around several characters, but several stories that revolve around one central character, Alex Dussart, who I play in the movie.

He is not the main character but the central character in the sense that the scenario, built as a kind of spider's web, will focus on him and revolve around his actions, through multiple narrative arcs: his past as a professional boxer, the drama he lived through and which haunts him every day, this specific relationship with his twin sister, the conflict with Azari and his men, his almost complete lack of social connection with those around him (work colleagues, etc.) and of course when this migrant father and daughter suddenly arrive in his life.

Alex Dussart is a taciturn person, silent, full of inner wounds that struggle to heal. This type of character appeals to me. He doesn't ask for anything from anyone, he almost stopped living after his own personal tragedy, and he goes through his life like a ghostly shadow of the person he used to be... but he continues to live, or survive, despite everything.

We can also feel an underlying strength in him, an anger that is bubbling up, ready to explode. I could identify with him, being very calm by nature myself and yet simultaneously possessing a certain impulsiveness or anger, which comes to the fore when witnessing animal mistreatment in particular. »



CREW

SCREENWRITER, DIRECTOR - LIONEL BERNARDIN

PRODUCER - STÉPHANIE SCHOONJANS

FIRST DIRECTOR ASSISTANT - GILLES BOTINEAU

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY - ROMAIN VALLADE

SET DECORATION - JONATHAN CHARRIAUD

SOUND OPERATOR - DAMIEN DEWET, ALAIN BLONDEAU

SCRIPT - LOGAN RICHARD

EDITOR - LIONEL BERNARDIN

ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK - LIONEL BERNARDIN

SOUND MIXER - JONATHAN MEREAU

COLORIST - VALENTIN DAMON



CAST

ALEX - JULIEN BARBIER

TAÏNAWO - JULIEN KITITI

AZARI - SÉBASTIEN CORONA

ÉVA - STÉPHANIE SCHOONJANS

JEAN-MARIE - JEAN-PIERRE MESNARD

AWAN - CLÉMENT LAGOUARDE

JOEY - HERVÉ FONTENY

AÏDA - SORAHYA PINVILLE-ASPILAIRE

TALLECK - GUILLAUME DELANOUE

KURT - MICKAËL PANNIER

SARAH - MIRA DISIC



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