



Let My People Go!

a film by Mikael Buch

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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

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A sweet and hilarious fusion of gay romantic comedy, Jewish family drama and French bedroom farce, Mikael Buch's *Let My People Go!* follows the travails and daydreams of the lovelorn Reuben (*Regular Lovers'* Nicolas Maury), a French-Jewish gay mailman living in fairytale Finland (where he got his MA in "Comparative Sauna Cultures") with his gorgeous Nordic boyfriend. But just before Passover, a series of mishaps and a lovers' quarrel exile the heartbroken Reuben back to Paris and his zany family—including Almodovar goddess Carmen Maura (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, Volver*) as his ditzy mom, and Truffaut regular Jean-François Stévenin as his lothario father. Scripted by director Mikael Buch and renowned arthouse auteur Christophe Honoré (*Love Songs*), *Let My People Go!* both celebrates and upends Jewish and gay stereotypes with wit, gusto and style to spare. The result is deeply heartwarming, fabulously kitschy and hysterically funny.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKAEL BUCH

What was your background prior to making your first feature film?

My father is from Argentina and my mother is Moroccan—a complicated mixture in the first place. I was born in France, but we moved to Taiwan when I was two months old. When I was five, we moved to Barcelona. I grew up there until I was 18, when I came to France to study film—first in Nantes for two years and then at La Fémis in Paris, where I directed several shorts.

How and when did movies first enter your life?

It was before I even learned to talk! Between the ages of two and six, I had an obsessive habit: at the same time every day, I would sit down and watch Walt Disney's *Snow White*. I was a solitary child and movies supplied me with a kind of dream world. That is probably why the comedies of Charlie Chaplin, Billy Wilder, Woody Allen etc. have been so precious to me from an early age, to be joined later by the films of Vincente Minnelli, Stanley Donen, Jacques Demy, and others.

Both your short film *Comment j'ai accepté ma place parmi les mortels* and *Let My People Go!* have the same starting point: An idyllically romantic, almost childish carefree love affair that suddenly falls apart due to a misunderstanding.

The person we love offers us an ideal world that we want to inhabit. It comes out most strongly in musicals—the cinema's ability to build a world of pure happiness that is, by definition, ephemeral and fragile but is also strong for that very reason. In these two films, the main character tries to a certain extent to reconcile the child he still is with the adult he is trying to become. In *Let My People Go!*, Reuben is a Parisian Jewish boy who has escaped his family's expectations of him in order to live the adult life that he has always dreamed of. But until he has resolved his childhood issues, he won't be able to become a fulfilled adult, either.

Why did you choose to set part of the film in Finland?

Finland, in French, sounds like "End Land"—the end of the earth. My co-writer Christophe Honoré and I had in mind that Reuben wanted to get as far away from his family as possible. Another reason we chose Finland was that we had no idea what it was like. We have a pretty clear picture of Sweden and other North European countries, but Finland feels more like virgin soil—except for the slanted view of it we get from Kaurismäki's films, which I like very much. For Reuben, it's a complete break from his previous life. To a Jewish family, the Nordic countries like Finland are unimaginably exotic.

The notion of family is deeply rooted in all of your films. How important is it to you?

Family is exciting territory for filmmaking. It's a place where each individual's hopes and fears clash with those of the family group, which makes it a powerful motor for comedy. Also, you're talking about feelings you may have had yourself. It's a place where everyone can find something they've experienced themselves. Having said that, the family relationships shown in this film are different from my own. The setting is autobiographical in terms of identity, but the characters are based on an assortment of memories and details of the Jewish community that I noticed when I was young.

I like the way you depict family relationships, like that of Teemu and his mother, for example.

Teemu's mother is the exact opposite of Reuben's. Through her, I wanted to show that whatever you do, you're always wrong in the eyes of your parents, who are forever trying to lay their own values on their children. Teemu and Reuben meet each other halfway: Teemu, with his ultra-progressive mother, is striving for a more conventional lifestyle; Reuben, who comes from a much more traditional family, is striving for a kind of freedom. In the end, all they both want to do is hide away in their little Finnish cabin in order to escape from their families' ideologies.

Is Reuben's sense of guilt linked to the argument between Judaism and homosexuality?

Absolutely. It is also linked to something bigger, that is, his relationship with tradition and the family environment, and his longing to live in another world. In many ways, Reuben relates to Finland just like I related to the movies when I was young. Reuben wants to live in another world and escape from a reality which certainly isn't awful, but just doesn't suit him.

So in order to become a happy adult, Reuben has to escape from the world of his childhood?

Reuben fled the world that he "suffered" in childhood in order to build his adult life the way he wants it in Finland. But escaping from your past isn't as easy as all that. It always comes back to haunt you. I don't think we can become an adult by denying the child we were. To be fully happy, Reuben has to come back and make peace with the world of his childhood. In that sense, the film contains a kind of celebration of childhood: if you grow up to be an adult without loving the child you were before, you'll be an unhappy adult—which is Reuben's problem!

Reuben's homosexuality is shown as being perfectly natural.

I didn't want to make a "coming out" movie. For people of my generation, there is something rather dated about the way the experience of discovering one's sexual identity is portrayed in film, but I'm well aware that the revelation of one's homosexuality can pose problems in other contexts. For Reuben, the revelation may have been painful at one time, but his place in his family is never at risk.

The film takes a quite uninhibited approach to sexuality in general.

I often find that sexuality in movies has a moral weight attached to it that I don't like at all. It's a way of linking sex to a kind of anxiety. I wanted to make a more playful story out of it. I don't think there's much point in showing sex in a film, unless it's depicting a moment in life that's really meaningful.

You co-wrote the script with Christophe Honoré...

I met Christophe at La fémis film school, where he acted as a kind of tutor for my graduation film. He invited me to work on three of his films, so writing with him followed quite naturally since he knows my tastes and my way of working better than anyone else. He played the part of screenwriter to the fullest by giving me the means to get where I wanted to go. He also has a great sense of structure, which was very useful.

How did you and Nicolas Maury construct the character of Reuben?

We started working way ahead of time. Nicolas is a tremendously hard worker. He had to spend several months learning Finnish. After that, we talked a great deal. I told him lots of stories about my childhood and things I'd noticed about Jewish families, especially their family relationships. We also watched a lot of films. Nicolas is a great movie buff, a real directorial partner. We re-watched various Woody Allen films and also *Torch Song Trilogy*—a very important film for me personally—in which a gay character is shown in a very flesh-and-blood, natural way. We also tried to invent a fully-fledged fictional character: we worked on the character's look, his way of behaving, and so on, together. And Nicolas can carry comedy in a way that is all his own.

How did you come to cast Carmen Maura and Jean-François Stévenin?

I felt they made a true movie couple. Their ways of being matched each other well: they are both elegant and down-to-earth. Jean-François Stévenin encapsulates French cinema as I like it best: he worked with Truffaut, Demy and Rozier, the French filmmakers closest to my heart. Also, Carmen Maura is an image from my childhood. Pedro Almodovar's films played a big role in my adolescence. I liked the idea that these two people, nourished by their careers in cinema, could produce between them a child like Reuben.

Was having Carmen Maura in the film a way of bringing you closer to Spain?

Carmen does indeed give the character a very Latin element that belongs to my childhood—a colorful blend of religious prejudice, voluptuousness, sensuality and disregard for privacy. She is an uninhibited character who can seem thoroughly untraditional because there is nothing docile or genteel in the way she asserts her identity. I grew up around women like her. Also, for the first time in my life I directed an actress in Spanish. To me, it's a language of privacy, almost of family. As a result, a very strong sense of familiarity grew up between us.

And the choice of the other characters?

Amira Casar was an early choice because we needed to give a dazzling, glamorous dimension to a character who lives in an almost permanent state of failure. It was important that she not be the standard cliché of an angst-ridden "ugly sister." As for Clément Sibony, I felt that physically and behaviorally he was a good foil for Nicolas Maury, rather as if they had been made in the same mold and then the mold had been broken when Reuben was born! I felt they made a non-stereotypical pair of brothers with as many similarities as differences between them.

How did you conceive the film's visuals?

In comedies, the actors and script customarily get most of the attention, as though everything else were of lesser importance. I have always been surprised when people give less care to the camerawork and production design. After all, comedy is perhaps the genre that has the most to do with artifice. I wanted to break with that custom and get close to a kind of cinema I love—to start with actual, material things rooted in a particular reality and use them to produce a different picture. Jacques Demy, Douglas Sirk, Wes Anderson and Almodovar have all made films rooted in a reality but that speak to something larger than life. A world of cinema in tune with our desires.

Did you work with any specific references?

My references range from Walt Disney to contemporary photographers. For example, the work of American photographer Gregory Crewdson inspired us with its colors and the intensity of its images. In fact, I work very much by accretion. I wanted the film to be narratively contemporary, but aesthetically timeless. To achieve that, we took the liberty of combining very discrete influences, such as items from

the 1950s mixed with other, more contemporary elements. For the Finnish part of the film, I told my director of photography Céline Bozon that I wanted to capture the same colors as in Super-8 film. Some of my references come from literature or music: the writings of Flannery O'Connor and Philip Roth also inspired me greatly.

Thinking back on the film, it struck me that *Let My People Go!* is a musical without the singing.

The same thing struck me during the shoot. Comedy, obviously, is all about rhythm and music. Much of the music was chosen before the shoot and has an important place in the film. Devendra Banhart's "Baby" (the opening credits music) was mentioned by name in the script, as was the band Noah and the Whale, several of whose pieces are heard. Since the film was constructed in a fairly eclectic manner, jumping back and forth between stories, from Finland to Paris, with continual changes of scenery, it was important to create fluidity. The idea was to construct a rhythm with things that are constantly renewing and changing themselves. The music composed for the film by Eric Neveux is the perfect extension of this thinking.

Did you have a particular kind of comedy in mind when you wrote the film?

Once I realized that it was going to be a comedy, I tried to ascertain the codes of the genre. Three names beginning with "A" helped to enlighten me: Allen, Almodovar and Anderson. Woody Allen for his writing and also his playful take on Jewish culture; Pedro Almodovar for the uninhibited side of his movies and his visual impact; and Wes Anderson for his rapport with childhood and his contemporary, yet timeless imagery. But these references were never overwhelming. Often, I only became aware of them afterwards. More than anything, I wanted to make the kind of elegant, iconoclastic comedy that I adore and don't often find in France.

—*Interview by Bernard Payen*

DIRECTOR Mikael Buch

Mikael Buch was born in Marseille in 1983. He entered the Directing department at La fémis film school in 2004. Several of his shorts, including *La Déchirure* and *Comment j'ai accepté ma place parmi les mortels*, were selected and won prizes at various festivals. In 2009, he directed *Accordez-moi* as part of a series of short films for ARTE. *Let My People Go!* is his first feature film.

CO-WRITER Christophe Honoré

One of France's most exciting young auteurs, Christophe Honoré was born in Brittany in 1970. After writing for venerable French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, Honoré has directed several acclaimed feature films (all starring Louis Garrel) including *Ma mère* (2004), *Dans Paris* (2006), *Love Songs (Les Chansons d'amour, 2007)*, *Making Plans for Lena* (2009), and most recently, *Beloved (Les Bien-aimés, 2011)*. Honoré's other screenplay credits include *Girls Can't Swim* (2000) and *Novo* (2005). He is also author of several novels and plays.

ACTOR Nicolas Maury

Nicolas Maury graduated from the Conservatoire National d'Art Dramatique in 2004. In the theatre he has worked with, among others, Philippe Minyana, Robert Cantarella, Guillaume Vincent, Florence Giorgetti and Frédéric Fisbach. His film roles include *Les Amants Réguliers (Regular Lovers)* by Philippe Garrel; *La Question Humaine (Heartbeat Detector)* by Nicolas Klotz; *Faut que ça danse ! (Let's Dance)* by Noémie Lvovsky; *Les Beaux Gosses (The French Kissers)* by Riad Sattouf; and *Belle Épine (Dear Prudence)* by Rebecca Zlotowski. He played the leading role in Mikael Buch's two most recent short films. Reuben in *Let My People Go!* is his first leading film role.

ACTRESS Carmen Maura

Born in Madrid in 1945, award-winning actress Carmen Maura studied literature and philosophy at Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. She had been acting in Spanish film and TV since the early 1970s when she met an aspiring filmmaker named Pedro Almodovar on a stage production of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Dirty Hands*. For more than a decade after that she was Almodovar's muse and leading lady in such groundbreaking films as *Pepi, Luci, Bom* (1980); *Dark Habits* (1983); *What I Have Done to Deserve This?* (1984); *Matador* (1986); *Law of Desire* (1987); Oscar nominee *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), for which she won the Goya (Spanish Oscar); and *Volver* (2006), for which she won (with her six co-stars) the Best Actress Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. Other recent films include Andre Techine's *Alice and Martin* (1998); Francis Ford Coppola's *Tetro* (2009); and Philippe Le Guay's *Women on the Sixth Floor* (2012), for which she won the 2012 Best Supporting Actress Cesar Award.

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CAST

Reuben
Rachel
Nathan
Irène
Samuel
Teemu
Maurice Goldberg
Monsieur Tilikainen
Helka

NICOLAS MAURY
CARMEN MAURA
JEAN-FRANÇOIS STÉVENIN
AMIRA CASAR
CLÉMENT SIBONY
JARKKO NIEMI
JEAN-LUC BIDEAU
KARI VÄÄNÄNEN
OUTI MÄENPÄÄ

CREW

Directed by
Screenplay by
Director of Photography
Production Designer
Sound

Casting Director
Costume Designer
Production Manager
Script
Editing
Original score
Associated Producer
Produced by

MIKAEL BUCH
MIKAEL BUCH and CHRISTOPHE HONORÉ
CELINE BOZON (AFC)
GWENDAL BESCOND (ACD)
MATHIEU VILLIEN, BENOIT HILLEBRANT
and STEPHANE THIEBAUT
RICHARD ROUSSEAU (ARDA)
ANAÏS ROMAND (AFCCA)
OLIVIER GUERBOIS
MATHILDE PROFIT
SIMON JACQUET
ERIC NEVEUX
DAVID THION
PHILIPPE MARTIN and GERALDINE MICHELOT

2012 • France • 88 mins • Color • In French and Finnish with English subtitles
Aspect ratio: 2.35:1 • Sound: Dolby SRD
35mm, DCP, HD-CAM and Blu-Ray



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