

## Hugo P. Thomas about JUNIORS

“This is how I experienced my teenage years: shockingly brutal”

Why does everyone want to go on holiday to those charming French villages? You wonder... because there is absolutely nothing to do! Jordan and Patrick should know, they live there and they are bored to death. Now even their PlayStation console - faithful companion in gloomy moments - is letting them down. They come up with a brilliant plan: Jordan will pretend to be severely ill and launch an online campaign to make his last wish come true: a PlayStation 5. The plan seems to work, but the lie turns against them with a force that they couldn't foresee.

JUNIORS starts hilariously, but if you think the laughing will never stop, you're wrong. After 20 minutes the film changes tone drastically and we are confronted with razor-sharp dilemmas. The only things that remain are the heat and the village life, and both are equally suffocating.

**JUNIORS starts with one of the weirdest opening images ever.**

Hugo P. Thomas: In the months before

the shoot, I thought about this image every night. I have this habit of falling asleep while imagining the project I'm working on. I have seen this picture in my dreams a million times. This is the story of a boy feeling stuck in the countryside, and in this image he is really “stuck” – literally.

**We're in a place where nothing ever happens and everyone is full of expectations about a life that will start later, someday, somewhere... but not here and now.**

Thomas: It's exactly about this feeling of being stuck while you dream about seeing the world. This is exactly how I felt when growing up in the countryside. It was in the early days of the internet and it felt like the world was suddenly within reach, but actually we were as stuck as before. This frustrating paradox, I wanted to address in this film.

**More than anywhere else, life in France happens in the big city.**

Thomas: France is all about Paris, but where I grew up Lyon was the near-



est big city. We make films about the suburbs, about people living in the ghettos, the *banlieues*, and the many problems they are facing. But they have role models, people from the neighbourhood who made it as famous actors or football players. In the countryside where I grew up, we didn't have a single success story. And I felt like people never made films about us.

**Is that why a lot of kissing is going on in the background? Is it because they're French, or because they simply feel bored?**

Thomas: I'm not sure how it is in other countries, but when I come back to my hometown, I often see teenagers with nothing better to do than literally kissing all day long. It looks a bit pathetic, I know, but they're having the time of their lives. We follow two teenage boys – kissing a girl would be





their ultimate dream! I wonder if it's the same in other countries, or is it just me being French, promoting the art of French kissing?

**Another thing that marks the film is the season: summer is for fun, excitement and big expectations, but then again nothing much is happening.**

Thomas: As a teenager, summer in the countryside was inspiring, with the rivers and lakes and a sense of adventure in the air. I love the imagery of films like *LES ROSEAUX SAUVAGES* (by André Téchiné, 1994).

**Jordan's house with its pink bathroom and yellow kitchen feels like a kind of dollhouse.**

Thomas: Women seemingly have more decisive power when it comes to interior decoration than men, and that amuses me. Such ultra feminine houses make me smile. She is a single mother so the place should look like hers.

**She is not just a single mother... She is also Vanessa Paradis.**

Thomas: Vanessa is truly an icon, a living part of French history. In the cinema industry, sometimes the most famous people are also the most

professional. I sent the script to her agent and two days later there was a reply. She was very professional but also super nice.

**She does a great job, making me wonder what it would be like, being a single mum in a place with so little prospects for the future.**

Thomas: She came to this house with her husband, and with a picture in her mind about the future, and none of it really happened. I often don't like famous superstars playing simple working class people, but Vanessa Paradis comes from a very normal background and for her it totally worked.

**Another interesting character is the school principal with her one blue hair strand... A great example of small town glamour.**

Thomas: That's exactly what it is. I've never seen as much fashion fantasy as with 50 year old ladies in the countryside. At this age they feel an urge to re-invent themselves, and then the haircuts come in all colours and shapes.

**I appreciate your observations! Do you have one for that outrageous gym teacher too?**

Thomas: For the sport scenes I was unconsciously influenced by the soc-

cer scene in *KES* (by Ken Loach, 1969). They have a soccer game and there is this teacher who is super involved and cheats because he wants to be the winner. Then my co-writer found a guy on YouTube who did 'extreme self-defence' clips. What on earth does that mean?! We hired him as our gym teacher. In his YouTube videos he works with super flexible professional karateka's, but now he had to perform with a bunch of youngsters and that was great fun. He is a nice guy, but he is also a martial arts teacher and you can sense all the time that he truly loves violence. He is full of paradoxes.

**Talking about violence... Let's talk about video games! This cliché really seems to bother you.**

Thomas: In complex matters, people always come with simple explanations. I love the movie *SCREAM* because it mocks the cliché that watching scary movies will make you a serial killer. I'm not taking a position in the video game debate, but I played around with the cliché that video games make kids act violently.

**What is so mythical about a PlayStation 5?**

Thomas: When we shot the movie, it was really difficult to get a hold of a PlayStation 5. When the model came



out, it was sold out immediately and the demand still exceeds the supply. It's the latest model – the best one – and it's still hard to find, so it comes with a special status. My co-writer Jules Lugan is the gaming expert. This movie tells about teenagers with a passion. Mine was cinema, but his passion was gaming. In the beginning of the movie the boys play video games, but by the end they kind of live one, chased by a mad crowd. They now experience in reality what they experienced before in the virtual world.

#### How was it for your art department to prepare that party scene?

Thomas: They did a great job. It was by far the hardest moment of the shoot. We were not allowed to work with youngsters during the night. We gathered 60 teenagers in full costume inside a small house during a heat-wave, the script girl was ill and everybody was on the verge of losing it. I could have fainted. The scene is not exactly how I wanted it to be – I could have done it twice as good under better circumstances.

#### In times of political correctness, here is a director who still dares to make jokes about cancer!

Thomas: Me and my co-writer Jules were in film school together, but then

he got cancer. When I presented the project to him, I wasn't sure whether he was going to appreciate it. No research required – all the knowledge is with him. I don't want to use him as an alibi for the way in which I'm dealing with the topic of 'cancer', but his approval made me feel safe, even when sometimes people who had lost a relative to cancer left the cinema. For Jules this was also a kind of therapy and a tribute to his persistence.

#### You found a question that Siri couldn't answer!

Thomas: I am obsessed with this question 'Am I a good person?'. The answer that I got from Siri was the one as I've used in the movie: *"I can't tell"*.

#### That thought stuck with me after the film: most people aren't that bad. I presume that usually films about people with good intentions are made by good people.

Thomas: Thank you! Most of what people do, is done with the best intentions, even if we screw up from time to time. You could say that Jordan and his mother have terrible communication, but the notes she leaves on the fridge are proof of a profound love. Jordan and Patrick have told a horrible lie, but if you see the bigger context, you feel compassion. Of-



Hugo P. Thomas in Zlin

ten people have good intentions but that's not enough to make a relationship work.

#### Jordan's punishment might at the same time be the thing that saves him: a ticket out of this suffocating village.

Thomas: He did a very bad thing and deserves a punishment – I couldn't let him get away with it. The movie needs a balance between violence and warmth. That is how I experienced my teenage years: shockingly brutal. The world is a cruel place at the age of 14: teenagers and teachers can be super

mean... You are completely innocent and then all of a sudden... bang! You have lived your childhood years in a protective world, and then suddenly brutality hits you.

– Gert Hermans