

KINO LORBER

Presents

SYNONYMS

A film by Nadav Lapid

with

Tom Mercier, Quentin Dolmaire, Louise Chevillotte

Screenplay: Nadav Lapid

****WINNER: Golden Bear | Berlinale****

****Official Selection | Toronto International Film Festival****

****Official Selection | New York Film Festival****

****Nominated for 4 Ophir Awards, including Best Actor for Tom Mercier****

France / 2019 / 123 minutes / Color / French with English subtitles

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Synopsis:

Yoav, (Tom Mercier), a young Israeli man, has just moved to Paris with great expectations that France will save him from what he sees as the madness of his country. Things don't get off to a great start as he discovers that the flat he's supposed to stay in is unfurnished and completely empty, and, while taking a bath there, has his belongings stolen. Not deterred easily and desperate to erase his origins, he refuses to speak Hebrew, relying on a French dictionary as his constant companion, and to communicate with the various people he encounters. Based on the real life experiences of writer-director Nadav Lapid, *SYNONYMS* is a tragicomic puzzle about cultural identities and the challenges of putting down roots in a new place. Newcomer Tom Mercier gives a hypnotic performance as the deeply alienated Yoav whose attempts to find himself awaken past demons while opening up an existential abyss.



An Interview with Nadav Lapid:

Synonyms was inspired by your stay in Paris in the early 2000s. Can you tell us about that time in your life?

Eighteen months after completing my military service, I started studying philosophy at Tel Aviv University. I wrote on sports in a hip weekly and I began writing short stories. At the time, cinema was of no particular interest to me, and overall life was beautiful. But one day, as if I had heard a voice out of nowhere, like Joan of Arc or Abraham the Patriarch, I realized I had to leave Israel. Leave right then, immediately and forever and uproot myself from the country, flee, save myself from an Israeli destiny. Ten days later, I landed at Charles-de-Gaulle airport. I chose France because of my admiration for Napoleon, my passion for Zidane, and a couple of Godard movies I had seen two months earlier. I had basic French, no permit or visa, and I knew no one. But I was determined never to come back. To live and die in Paris.

I refused to speak Hebrew. I cut all ties with Israelis. I devoted myself completely to the obsessive reading of a French dictionary, and a few odd jobs to get by. I lived in poverty and solitude. I counted every cent. I ate the same meal every day—the simplest and cheapest I could come up with.

One day, I made a friend, a French friend, the best friend I ever had. A strong bond developed between us, despite and perhaps because of the disparity—socially, culturally and mentally—between us. In my eyes, he was the ultimate Frenchman, whom I wanted to resemble with all my heart, while also wanting, with my Napoleonic and adolescent megalomania, to outstrip and subdue him.

It was at that time that you discovered the cinema and cinephilia.

Yes, thanks to my friend and Paris, I came to see cinema as essential, absolutely vital. He taught me what a shot, a scene and a single-shot scene were. He taught me that cinema could be a subject of thought and debate. He showed me that the only thing as beautiful as a beautiful film is the ability to talk about the film, dissect the film and write about the film.

Besides that, life in Paris was difficult, especially on a mental level. Poverty, monotony, marginality. My French fantasies drifted ever farther away, even as my French became ever more refined. In the end, I decided to apply to La Femis, a school that I pictured as a gateway to cinema, France and French cinema. I was rejected at the very last stage of the admissions process. Looking back now, I realize I was insufficiently trained. That's when an Israeli publishing house decided to release a collection of my short stories. Paris seemed like a dead end to me. With a sense of total defeat, I turned my back on France and returned to Israel.

Synonyms seems to dialogue with your previous films: Yoav is the child's name in *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014), his friends Emile and Caroline have the same first names as the protagonists in the short feature, *Emile's Girlfriend* (2006), and the virile rituals of

masculinity are an extension of those in Policeman (2011). Do you see each film as part of a single work of art?

Even if I don't plan it that way, clearly my films—shorts as much as features— make up a single movement. They all speak the same phrases with the same music. Naturally, there are tactical variations and nuances that reflect different stages of life—different angles and perspectives, themes observed sometimes from the left, sometimes from the right. Almost unwittingly, intuitively, I choose the same names over and over. And if that's how it is, why hide it? If these are the same people, why give them different names?

Yoav's obsession with suppressing his Israeli past and becoming French manifests itself through language first and foremost. Why?

I think that language is the most intrinsic thing we have that we can change. It is difficult to change our bodies. The past cannot be changed. Yoav's body contains his past. It contains his essential nature, which he wishes to decapitate. I remember myself at the time mumbling French words like a prayer. The French language was my redemption.

As time goes by, Yoav is confronted by the disconnect between his French identity fantasy and real life. He realizes it might all end as it began—at a closed door. His attempts to avoid that abyss result in his language becoming increasingly radical. Radical in the sense of a desperate attachment to the words, syllables, dic- tion and sounds of French. To that French prayer. Words become more important than sentences or context. Words rebel against their meaning. This is, moreover, a characteristic stage in a breakdown.

In aesthetic terms, the street scenes and the shaky camera that accompanies Yoav, switching in a single shot, from a subjective point of view to an external point of view, expresses a disorientation with regard to reality...

As expressed by the catchphrase of German expressionist painters—paint not the passing car but the feeling experienced as it passes—my film endeavors to film not views of Paris, but feelings experienced by Yoav, or myself, when walking in the city. Yoav's gaze is that of the person who does not want to see. At the beginning of the film, he refuses to look up to take in the Seine because he is looking for another, authentic, intimate Paris, not tourist Paris. He is looking for the city you feel or sense without looking, without using your eyes, when your head is tilted toward the sidewalk and your mouth utters a constant stream of synonyms. How do you film a gaze that does not look at the city? Or looks at it differently? I have a sense that Yoav wants to create his own Paris, hoping that one day, he will be able to belong to it. It is also an attempt on my part to find my Paris, a city that has been filmed by so many French and foreign filmmakers.

The shots of Yoav's wanderings were filmed with a small, cheap, almost primitive camera and a small crew—actor, cameraman, sound recordist and me. That intimacy allowed us to really feel things. I wanted those feelings, those tremblings, to be felt also by the body of the person filming, me or the cameraman, as well as by the body of the camera itself. There is no reason to film a trembling man in a squared off, stable way. On the contrary, you need to tremble with

him. If, in those moments, cinema is also movement, choreography, there is no reason for the camera not to dance along with it.

The story of Hector and Achilles at the siege of Troy captures what is at work within the film itself. Why use that story?

By identifying with Hector, even at age four, Yoav is already in revolt against the Israeli ethos—which is not only an ethos of victory, but also of absolute prohibition of defeat. In Israel, we were all raised that way, and it's something we still believe. We have no right to lose, not even once. France, for example, has lost on several occasions. And it is still here. But for us, losing is synonymous with the end. That's why identifying with a loser is a revolt against the eternal sacralization of victory and the mythical perception of the victor as a hero. Some people might be inclined to link this Israeli taboo, this deep-rooted anxiety about the possibility of defeat, with the tragic Jewish experience, especially in the 20th century.

Yoav deliberately takes the side of the losers, but Hector is not only beaten by Achilles, the stronger man. Hector is beaten by a heroine who is even more terrifying than Achilles—death itself. Death, as Yoav understands at age four, is stronger even than heroism. Yoav has carried death on his back from that age. I also think that Yoav's unconscious (or conscious perhaps) choice of an existential reference drawn from Greek mythology rather than the bible (the “natural” choice for an Israeli), is already an outsider's choice.

Synonyms offers a relatively morose depiction of the French bourgeoisie. Caroline and Emile, for example, form a quite jaded couple. They seem to want to help Yoav, but in fact they take advantage of his presence to add spice to their relationship.

Within the Yoav-Emile-Caroline triangle, a delicate, fragile tension develops between personal interest, exploitation, fascination and genuine love for each other. This tension also symbolizes the affection-rejection relationship between Israel and France.

Yoav's body is also the theatre of a war between Israeli and French core values. He is surrounded by people who represent one side or the other. Yaron and Emile, for example. Past memories on one side, present images on the other. Yoav progresses between his Israeli body and his French words. In that respect, it is hardly coincidental that he tortures his body, that he fights his body.

Tom Mercier, who plays Yoav, is a true revelation. How did you find him? How did you prepare him for the role?

Tom was at drama school when he came for an audition for *Synonyms*. The stories and legends people tell about film auditions have almost become clichés, but Tom's audition really was an extraordinary experience, totally unforgettable for me and my casting director, Orit Azulay. Even after working with thousands of actors, she was left in shock. When Tom left the room, we canceled the rest of the day's auditions. We simply needed to go for coffee and think over what we had just seen. It was not necessarily the quality of his performance, but his presence—an

astonishing blend of complete freedom and near-obsessive attention to detail. It was a savage, brutal, violent, sensitive and volatile mixture. With a playful, vulnerable and charismatic aspect. And a sexuality that is impossible to classify or catalogue. The mixture of all that was in fact Tom himself. Usually, after an audition, actors will try to connect with the director or, conversely, keep their distance to protect themselves. When Tom finished his audition, which needs to be shown because some things he did were magnificent, some of his improvisation was wonderful—and usually I don't like improvisation. He did things that were strange, liberated, wild, and the very second it was over, he simply said Shalom, and walked out. No attempt to bond.

Beyond all his qualities and talent, Tom is the most immediate and genuine actor I have ever encountered. He is nothing but truth. His investment in the film was total and, to some extent, he went through the same process as I did when I was in Paris at the same age. He learned French by immersing himself totally in the language. He moved to Paris and cut himself off completely from Israel. Now, a year after the shoot, he still lives in France. I think that his great creativity, his sincerity and inventiveness inspired in me a kind of vitality and liberty on set. It allowed me to veer toward the unplanned, unexpected, or savage. I advanced with my detailed, precise shot breakdown, and the total lack of planning that Tom embodied.

Now that the film is finished, do you feel you have overcome your neurosis, the fracture linked to your dual relationship to France and Israel?

I cannot say with any degree of certainty, but I suppose that sharing one's neuroses with others through art is a form of therapy.

Director/Screenwriter's Biography:

Nadiv Lapid was born in Tel Aviv, Israel, and studied philosophy at Tel Aviv University. He later earned his degree at the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem. After directing his first short film, *Emile's Girlfriend*, in 2006, Lapid's debut feature film entitled *Policeman* won the Locarno Festival Special Jury Prize at the 2011 Locarno International Film Festival. Since then, he has gone on to direct three additional feature films including *The Kindergarten Teacher*, released by Kino Lorber and later remade in English. *Synonyms* won him the prestigious Golden Bear award at the 2019 Berlin International Film Festival.

Actors' Biographies:

Tom Mercier is an Israeli actor and makes his debut in *Synonyms* after being discovered by Nadiv Lapid while he was a student at the Yoram Levinstein Acting Studio in Tel Aviv. Mercier currently lives in Paris.

Quentin Dolmaire is a French actor who earned critical acclaim for his debut role as Paul Dédalus in 2015's *My Golden Days*; it resulted in his nomination for the César Award for Most Promising Actor. He has since acted in several short and feature-length films.

Louise Chevillotte was discovered by French director Philippe Garrel while she was a student at the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art in Paris. Subsequently, her first role was in Garrel's *The Lover of A Day*. *Synonyms* is her second feature film.

Cast

Tom Mercier as Yoav
Quentin Dolmaire as Emile
Louise Chevillotte as Caroline

Director

Nadav Lapid

Screenplay

Nadav Lapid & Haim Lapid

Production Company

SBS Films

with the participation of

Pie Films
Komplizen Film

Producers

Säid Ben Säid & Michel Merkt

Co-Producers

Osnat Handelsman Keren & Talia Kleinhendler
Janine Jackowski, Jonas Dornbach, Maren Ade

Production Manager

Marianne Germain

First Assistant Director

Justinien Schricke

Cinematographer

Shaï Goldman

Editor

Era Lapid, François Gédigier, Neta Braun

Sound

Marina Kertész, Sandy Notarianni, Christophe Vingtrinier

Wardrobe

Khadija Zeggai

About Kino Lorber:

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Classics, and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years, including documentary nominees *Fire at Sea* (2017) and *Of Fathers & Sons* (2019). Current and upcoming releases include Berlinale Golden Bear winner *Touch Me Not* and Cannes winners Jean-Luc Godard's *The Image Book* and Jafar Panahi's *3 Faces* and Bi Gan's epic 3D film *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms.