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Film Discussion Group  
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## *Little Men* (dir. Ira Sachs, 2016)

### On Camera

Jake: Theo Taplitz: Feature debut; young guitarist and director of short films  
Tony: Michael Barbieri: Feature debut; already filming two big Hollywood features  
Brian, Jake's dad: Greg Kinnear: *As Good As It Gets* (97); *Little Miss Sunshine* (06)  
Kathy, his wife: Jennifer Ehle: BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (95); this fall's *A Quiet Passion* (16)  
Leonor: Paulina García: *Gloria* (13); *Narcos* (TV 15-16); eminent actress and director  
Hernan: Alfred Molina: *Enchanted April* (91); *Frida* (02); *Love Is Strange* (14)

### Off Camera

Cinematography Óscar Durán: none of his credits were familiar to me, but he's won awards  
Editing Affonso Gonçalves: all of Sachs' films, plus *Winter's Bone* (10), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (12), *Carol* (15); and Mollie Goldstein: *Palindromes* (04)  
Art Direction: Alexandra Schaller: *Maggie's Plan* (15); *The Get Down* (TV 16)  
Musical Score: Dickon Hinchliffe: two previous movies for Sachs; *Winter's Bone* (10)

### Previous features from director-cowriter Ira Sachs

*The Delta* (1996) – Dark, atmospheric, *Huck Finn*-inspired romance between a white Southern teenager becoming aware of his homosexuality and a half-black, half-Vietnamese stranger  
*Forty Shades of Blue* (2005) – Top prize at Sundance; love triangle among Memphis music producer (Rip Torn), his Russian wife (Dina Korzun), and his distant son (Darren Burrows)  
*Married Life* (2007) – Mannered, *Far from Heaven*-ish comedy-drama set in the 1940s about a man (Chris Cooper) plotting to kill his wife (Patricia Clarkson) and marry a young mistress  
*Keep the Lights On* (2012) – Semi-autobiographical drama about a gay European filmmaker (Thure Lindhardt) who has a multi-year relationship with a younger, drug-addicted lawyer  
*Love Is Strange* (2014) – Our very first movie! About two men (Alfred Molina and John Lithgow) who marry after several years, lose their apartment, and have to live separately

### Direct influences on *Little Men*...

*I Was Born, But...* (1932) – One of two films by the Japanese master Yasujirô Ozu that include a plotline about two boys refusing to speak to their parents and which inform *Little Men*'s tone.  
*The Fallen Idol* (1948) – Classic British semi-mystery about a young boy who misperceives and then misreports interactions among his family's servants, and tries too late to fix his errors.

If you liked *Little Men*, you might also enjoy...

*The 400 Blows* (1959) – One of the absolute classics of midcentury French cinema, and a huge influence on many child-focused movies that followed. An enduring favorite the world over.

*The Ice Storm* (1997) – More sober than *Little Men*, maybe, but another story in which the adults and the children in two neighboring families are drawn ever-closer together through a tangled web of secrets, friendships, domestic tensions, and social factors of their time and place.

*Raising Victor Vargas* (2002) – If you enjoyed Tony’s character in *Little Men* and the sense of an authentic, contemporary, kid’s-eye view of New York City, you’ll like this underseen jewel.

*The Squid and the Whale* (2005) – Similar tone to *Little Men*, about a family of four in the 1970s where the adults *and* the kids think they have each other’s number, but they’re all confused.

*Gloria* (2013) – No similarity to *Little Men*’s plot or tone, but the best chance to see what actress Paulina García, a huge star in her native Chile, can do with a meaty leading role. A crowd-pleasing semi-comedy of a woman in her late 50s determined to keep living a passionate life.

Facts about *Little Men* you may appreciate...

The original title during script development was *Silent Treatment*, and the boys’ vow of silence against their parents was a much bigger hinge and more drawn-out conceit in the story.

Co-writer Mauricio Zacharias is from Rio de Janeiro, where his family had to evict a shopkeeper from a retail lot they owned, directly inspiring some of the plot twists in *Little Men*.

Boris Torres, the husband of writer-director Ira Sachs, came to New York City from Ecuador at 10 years old with his single mother, and grew up to be a painter after attending LaGuardia High School—inspiring aspects of Leonor and Tony’s story, but also Jake’s love of painting.

Neither of the boys has ever starred in a feature before. Taplitz (Jake) has already directed some short films of his own, which you can see here: <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/06/shorts-theo-taplitz-1201688632/>. Barbieri (Tony) was a rookie, taking the exact same acting class his character takes in the film, with those same classmates, under the same instructor. He has recently been accepted into the LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts as an actor.

*Little Men* was financed piecemeal by 20+ donors, allowing it to amass the necessary budget without entitling any one sponsor to creative oversight. Sachs’s next project is for HBO.

Fans of Sachs’s movies often comment on how “lived-in” the performances feel and how well the actors and characters seem to know each other—all the more impressive since Sachs allows no rehearsal on his movies, so the lines and scenes are all fresh before the camera.

*Little Men* has younger protagonists than other Sachs films, and is partly inspired by Sachs having his own twin four-year-olds, whom he raises with his husband their female neighbor.

The name “Tony” was an allusion to *West Side Story*, since Sachs and Zacharias envisioned *Little Men* as a kind of platonic *Romeo and Juliet* about two friends from warring families.

*Little Men* was shot in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, one that has gentrified much more than the onscreen community Sachs had in mind, which he imagined as closer to Bay Ridge or Bensonhurst. The film is purposefully elliptical about where in New York it is set.

## Broad conversation topics...

**Principles:** It's hard to imagine a viewer who wouldn't ask herself during and after this movie what she would have done in Brian's circumstances, or Leonor's, or any of the other characters'. Which figures did you relate to most, either in their decisions or in their emotions? What considerations were most important to you as you evaluated everyone's choices, or as you wondered what your own impulses would have been?

**Key Omissions:** Sachs's movies have gotten shorter as his career has continued, and he is more inclined to leave out sequences the audience expects to see. In *Little Men*, it definitely affects our experience that, e.g., we do not meet Brian's late father or witness his death; that the boys' process of becoming dear friends is skipped over with a simple cut; and that Leonor's departure is so sudden after Hernan explains she has no better option. What else did you expect to see that *Little Men* withheld? How did you react to the movie's rhythms?

**“Gentrification”:** Sachs has used this term sparingly in interviews about the movie, since he believes the word connotes a very contemporary dynamic—whereas something like “class tensions” or even “money” connote an older, more universal source of dramatic conflict. Did you see the story as *specifically* framed around personal and economic realities of modern life in a 21st-century city, or as an expression of more longstanding human foibles?

**Mourning:** Brian and Leonor both start the movie amidst deep grief for the father and friend they have both lost. As the movie continues, it is possible for them and for us to get so swept up in the property dispute that we neglect its crucial contexts. How much did you understand each character's behavior in relation to the mourning process they were still undergoing? What other information was most important to you in making sense of everyone's actions?

**Attraction and Separation:** Many viewers and critics have surmised that Jake harbors a kind of pre-sexual, even pre-romantic, unrequited crush on Tony, and that the events of the movie interrupt this attraction as well as the friendship. Did you share this interpretation? How did it affect your sense of the film's ending sequence in the museum? (Sachs has admitted often that he did have this sense of Jake's emotional journey, but was also determined to project any particular sexuality or future onto a character this young.)

**Ethnicity:** Sachs has said that his determination to make Leonor Chilean, rather than a white U.S.-born woman in similar circumstances, was a likely hurdle in securing quicker funding or wider distribution. How would the story have changed if she were not an immigrant?

**Community:** In a conversation with the *Village Voice*, Sachs talked about how important community is to the characters in *Love Is Strange* and in *Little Men*, as opposed to the more socially isolated figures in his earlier films. That can sound automatically like a good thing, but Sachs and his interviewer also agree that even genuine feelings of community cause some of the problems in the film—as when Brian's late father, who prefers direct expressions of friendship and understanding to formalized contracts, unwittingly leaves Leonor in a lurch when he dies. What do we know about the different “communities” available to the different characters in the film? How do they draw or not draw upon them as a resource or a comfort?

### Specific touches worth discussing...

**Opening Credits:** Given what you now know of where the film evolves, what do you make of the bright, juvenile palette of the opening titles—bright greens, yellows, blues, and reds, quite unlike the paler, more subdued color scheme of the rest of the movie? How about the decision to start the film amidst a chaotic classroom, where only Jake is focused on a task? (The first lines, not coincidentally, are: “What’s going on in here? What *is* this mess?”)

**Pilar:** Jake is picked up from school by a Latina maid whom we rarely meet again in the rest of the movie. What happened to her? How might the dynamics of the story have shifted if she stayed on the scene—and what does it mean that the Jardines seem to have let her go?

**Costumes:** When we meet Leonor, she is in a loose-hanging black blouse that looks nothing like the clothes she designs and sells in her store. Maybe her choice is dictated by her friend’s funeral transpiring upstairs—but it’s a funeral she refuses to attend. Shortly afterward, Kathy’s eye is caught by a “green paisley” dress in Leonor’s shop that she quickly covets, even though it looks nothing like her usual wardrobe, and it isn’t really “paisley.” When else did costuming choices tell us something or raise a question about the characters?

**Framing:** As Brian rehearses for *The Seagull*, there is only one other actor on stage—but even though this is a rehearsal, not a performance, the seats are *full* of production staff and other people evaluating his work. What does this tell us about Brian, or about the movie—that people’s eyes are always open and judging, even when he’s newly exploring something?

**Dialogue:** The scene where Jake first answers the phone call from his grandfather’s old friend strongly implies that Jake’s parents haven’t told him about the funeral—or maybe even the death. Later, Brian uses the euphemism that Kathy has “had another emergency” at work, which Jake assumes is code for a suicidal patient. What does it mean that Brian and Kathy seem to avoid full honesty with Jake—and that he seems to realize it, so acutely?

**Sound:** During the scene where Brian pleads with his son that it’s important to let things go, and not to cry over comic books lost in the move, we hear a car alarm sounding in the street outside. This sound may tell us something about the environment of the neighborhood, but also creates some thematic tension between things that get *misplaced* vs. those that get *stolen*.

**The Dinner Table:** As Brian describes the plot of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* to his son, he talks about his character’s love affair with the famous actress Arkadina, but he mispronounces her name as “Akardina.” This play is famous enough in theater circles that this mistake is a bit like saying “Halmet” instead of “Hamlet.” What does it tell us about Brian that he gets it wrong, despite seeming to make a point of pronouncing it right? What did you make of Kathy’s failure to look up from her plate or look anyone in the eye as she praises Brian’s “adaptability” and encourages Jake to admire this trait in his father?

**Ambition:** Tony, not Jake, is the first of the boys to announce a goal of attending the LaGuardia High School. Jake’s desire to apply at first stems more, maybe, from mimicking Tony’s desire than from his own initiative, though he has a vague memory that his dad applied there. (When Brian asks Tony how he will handle the school’s rejection, he may be reminiscing.)

**Home:** We don't know exactly where Leonor lives and never see it, though it's far enough away that she doesn't feel able to pick Tony up from the Jardines' house once it gets too late in the evening. What did you imagine about Leonor's own home environment? What does it mean that she is this committed to owning a shop that is so inconveniently located for her?

**Music:** The only times we hear the movie's full, sweet, melodic overture during the actual film are in the montage interludes when Tony and Jake walk or ride or skate through the city. The same scenes also feature more camera movement than we see in the rest of the film, which often favors static shots. The boys *and* the city, then, are associated with a bright, rolling musical score that tends to subside around the adults, just as the camera also tends to freeze up around them. What does this tell us about the film's take on age, energy, and New York?

**Diversity:** Tony's acting classmates are a notably diverse bunch. This is not the kind of movie where background players are mostly white, or where acting is seen as a privileged calling.

**Theatricality:** Tony describes his mother as "so dramatic, she deserves an Academy Award." On one hand, this may sound like the petulant gripe of a child against a fairly modest parent. On the other, Leonor probably *is* more calculating in how she speaks, dresses, and acts than she may initially appear. When did you notice evidence of this "self-dramatizing" quality?

**Language:** As Tony pleads to sleep over at Jake's the night of Leonor's first fight with Brian, he implores her in English and she answers in Spanish—possibly because Jake is there listening. What does this linguistic asymmetry tell us about mother and child? (Paulina García reports that, just like their characters, she mostly addressed Michael Barbieri in Spanish and he mostly answered in English, even if it meant they sometimes misunderstood each other.)

**Mirroring:** As with their plan to apply together to LaGuardia, Tony initially hatches the plan of refusing to speak to his mother, which Jake then agrees to echo. What does it suggest to you that Jake keeps following Tony's example? Who else in the film does this?

**Framing:** In the last scene where Tony and Jake cavort around New York City together, they are mostly shown in "two shot," i.e., in the same frame, rather than in isolated close-ups... *but*, this time, there are some insinuations of new barriers forming between them, like the subway pole that visually separates them in the shot of their conversation while riding the train.

**Repetition and Performance:** The only scene we see in the *Seagull* production is the exact same snippet we saw in rehearsal. What does it mean that, even when Brian expresses his art, he repeats himself? Meanwhile, both the director of *The Seagull* and the actress playing Trigorin's dominant lover, Arkadina, are black women. What subtle signal does it send that in Brian's fictional and professional life, he is subordinated to two women of color?

**Suggestions of Sophistication:** Even as Leonor denies any knowledge of *The Seagull*, during Brian's final attempt to negotiate with her and establish some common ground, she is playing Dvorák's opera *Rusalka* in her shop—hardly the choice of a woman unfamiliar with high culture. Why might she pretend to know less than she does about Brian's world?