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A PRIMITIVE FILM

RAY & LIZ

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY RICHARD BILLINGHAM

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RAY & LIZ

A film by Richard Billingham
2018, 108 minutes UK
Color 1:33 - 5.1 - English

Synopsis

On the outskirts of Birmingham and the margins of society the Billingham family perform extreme rituals and break social taboos as they muddle through a life decided by factors beyond their control. At times shocking and laced with an unsettling humour, three episodes unfold as a powerful evocation of the experience of growing up in a Black Country council flat.

RICHARD BILLINGHAM

BY ELIZABETH FULLERTON

"Richard Billingham's blisteringly honest photos of his alcoholic dad and his mountainous, tattooed mom—Ray and Liz, as they have come to be intimately known—were the toast of Charles Saatchi's epochal late-'90s exhibition "Sensation" (...).

Since that debut, in London in 1996, Billingham has expanded his subject matter to include caged animals in a zoo and landscapes of familiar environs in England and foreign climes such as Ethiopia and Pakistan. More recently, he turned his camera on his own young family with a partner and three children—a far cry from the dysfunctional scenes of an upbringing that propelled him to fame.

The artist's latest project is extrapolating his early career-making photographs into a new form: his debut feature film about his childhood titled RAY & LIZ. Working closely with producer Jacqui Davies for more than 5 years to achieve this, the film is a meditation on themes of loneliness, negligence, and bullying, with actors employed to reconstruct traumatic episodes from the past.

One of Billingham's favorite early photographs from his fertile beginning shows his father Ray in bed under the covers, a headboard forming a halo against patterned wallpaper. "It's quite calm, like he's in a landscape. He is a landscape" said the artist, who considers himself a landscape photographer despite having made his name taking pictures of people. (...)

"I was very interested in the paintings of van Gogh and Degas, when they paint from life and try and get down something quick," Billingham said. "I painted on cardboard and old bed sheets, things that I could find to get these direct observation paintings of Ray in his room."

(...)

While some critics have interpreted his work as voyeuristic or sensational in its depiction of Margaret Thatcher-era poverty, Billingham insists his motivation is to recreate faithfully a world he witnessed. "By going back to the original locations where events took place, I hope to be authentic and represent what life looks like," he said. "For me, it's about lived experience."

Elizabeth Fullerton, a writer based in London, is the author of *Artrage! The Story of the BritArt Revolution*, published by Thames & Hudson. Copyright 2018, Art Media ARTNEWS, Inc. 110 Greene Street, 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10012. All rights reserved.





AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR RICHARD BILLINGHAM

What's the link between the original photography series Ray's a Laugh and this film?

I'm providing a backstory for the photographs. I had the idea for the film years ago, as long ago as when I was still living with Ray. I thought of the situation as a film.

It's all shot from lived experience. As much as possible, it's based on the way I remember things. I want that to come through in the film, more than anything. Some of the photographs are referenced in the film. Even though it's set at a different time, some of those motifs are familiar. Making the film was like going back in time.

Why did you originally start taking photographs?

The photographs were source material for paintings. I only shot ten rolls of film in the space of a year. I was poor, so every shot counted. If the technology had been different I probably would have taken some documentary footage at the time.

When did you develop the screenplay for the film?

The story had been in my head for twenty years, but I've never been able to write it down. Once I decided to work on a film, I wrote a version of it straight away. The story about my uncle was there in my head. I wrote it down in a train for two hours.

I found myself writing gestures, body language, even the way they might sit. It was very clear to me. When I'm writing it, I have looks, gestures, sounds already mapped out.

What was it like to 'go back in time' and work on a film that was essentially a dramatised memory?

Was it strange? Lots of people ask that. But you're so pressured with time and money that you don't have time to reflect. You don't have the luxury of that, you just get on with it.

You focus very carefully on gestures, body language and minute physical moments. What do they provide as a director?

I wanted the sections of the film about older Ray to be about to be about a man in a hermit-like existence, unaware that anyone is watching him. In doing that, a shot of him picking up a glass, or lighting a cigarette, montaged together, can create a lot of significance.

We didn't have a shot list, there was nothing like that. We'd go in each morning and have a thought: "This looks interesting. Let's do this bit here."

I know what things look like in camera. When you get a close-up of something, I know that a twitch of a finger or something like that can make a massive difference.





When you were casting, what were you looking for?

The casting took ages. The actors came from theatre, apart from White Dee (Deirdre Reilly), who came from reality TV. With Patrick Romer, who plays the older Ray, once he was in dress he looked remarkably similar. I had to tell him not to act. Instead of doing three facial movements, just do one, I'd say, otherwise it looks confusing on screen. I would say: "Stay there, close your eyes, keep still, don't do anything." He said to me: "I've done seven years at RADA for this."

How did White Dee take to the experience?

We met in a McDonald's Drive Through. She was nervous. It was a risk for us, but a risk worth taking. With actors who have little experience, you have to expect them to behave as they do. That's what I was looking for.

How would you describe your childhood to someone that doesn't know you?

What was it like growing up? I've just been reading a book called The Girl With No Name, about a girl who grew up with monkeys in Colombia. She seems to have fond memories of that.

When we were in the terraced house, we lived in the street without cars. I had mates in the street, and we went in and out of people's houses. I don't think I was very happy in the flats, because you were stuck up in the sky. You had a great view, but piss and shit in the lifts, and every square inch of the walls were covered in racist graffiti. There was a feeling of threat. I wanted to get out as soon as possible. It was anxiety provoking. I felt threatened, but I got used to it.

What was it like to leave home for the first time, and to see the world beyond Ray and Liz?

We were never taught to be ambitious or to have expectations. Kids are taught to go after things. I never had that, and it didn't help. It felt good that I wasn't

there anymore. I saw it as a positive. I had freedom. I was at university, so I met like-minded people.

Liz's crafts - her jigsaws and possessions - play an important part in both the photography and film. Can you comment on that part of her life for me?

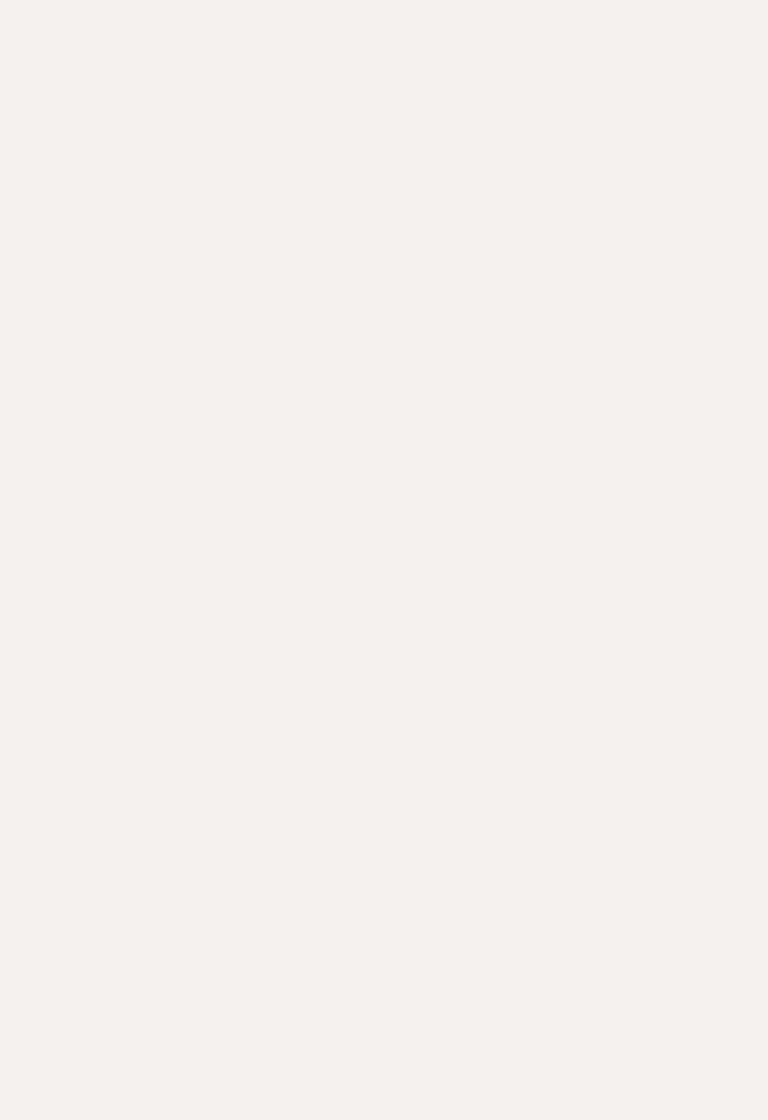
With Liz, there was never a sense of artistic purpose. She placed objects very carefully, and she loved crafts, but there wasn't any meaning to it. There was a different sort of purpose. The purpose was to pass the time I guess. It was very rare she would complete anything - she would want to start something else.

How was your photography first discovered?

Julian Germain gave a talk about his own photographs at my university. I liked the way he talked about them as his own pictures, rather than documentary photographs. He talked like an artist about them, so I showed him some of my photographs. He looked at each picture and say: "That's fuckin' great, that is." Then he'd look at the next and say the same thing. He'd look at them pictorially, which I connected to. He didn't ask questions about what was going on. He wanted to talk about them as pictures.

Ray's a Laugh was hugely successful. How did you handle that attention?

Two years after I graduated, Julian helped him to get it published. It was a nice surprise. I was working at Kwiksave. I found a sense of belonging when I went to uni, and I found a greater belonging when I found the art world. I could talk to people who were likeminded. Do you know what it's like to talk to people who work in a supermarket? It wasn't the job, it was the people I had to work with. It was horrendous, you know. I was so glad not to have to work with those people. People who vote for the BNP. There was a lot of anger there, and they had to find routes to express their anger.





INTERVIEW ELLA SMITH

How would you describe Richard Billingham as a director?

He's a really refreshing director, from an actor's point of view. I made my first film last year in Kenya, as a director, so I've seen both sides of it. He is fastidious about his truth, and he's honouring it in a way that feels right for him because he lived it. When he manages to recreate or summon that time, you can see his face light up.

I don't know if it's cathartic for him, but I can see it's affecting him. Even though some of the scenes are very sad, lonely and broken, he and his family, who I've met now, have this constant spark in them that I think is probably one of those amazing coping strategies for anyone who grows up in any sort of adverse circumstances like that. They still have a love for life.

How did that affect your performance?

You might ask a quite simple question like, 'what did Liz sound like when she talked', because you're trying to get all the information needed to play the role. And he would say, 'no, she didn't talk'. He'd just tell you straight, and then he would give you these amazing reasons why she wouldn't talk, because she wanted to make things last longer in the day, because there was nothing to do and she was bored. And that's a note you can really grab. You wouldn't get those conceptual notes from most directors. You don't really get that insight. But I have been completely thrilled to work with him, because we turned up not being from the Black Country, not knowing anything about the project, and very quickly we were immersed in it because of Richard. He's staying true to his own

authenticity of memory. It's important to him to sort of recreate something that, even if it doesn't make sense to anyone else, and even if it doesn't bear any significance to the audience, is still important to him.

There's a sort of artistic integrity and purity to that.

Absolutely. And the heads of department worked incredibly hard to help him achieve that. What Richard wanted, we created. As part of the role, I was having all these tattoos put on me, and we went to a tattoo shop, and he spoke to the tattoo woman for about half an hour about exactly where the rose was, and the bird, and the size, and the colours. That's not usually something a director would fixate on... They would just say: 'Oh, the art department will do that' If something is not right, I think it bumps against him a bit.. In saying that, I think he's learnt the compromise of film making, and budget, and being on set, and the time restraints. He's learnt along the way, and he's dealt with it with real charm.

In terms of your own process and understanding of a character, and the way in to the performance, did you spend a lot of time with the photographs that established his name? How did you study them? How did that relate to your performance on the day?

As soon as I was cast, I pulled every picture online that I could get. And I watched and read everything about Richard that I possibly could. Because, as every actor thinks, my mindset was: 'Oh God I'm playing a real person - someone who has real relatives, and they are going to

watch this’. That fear is a very good fear because it makes you work even harder. And then, I got to meet him, and throw millions of questions at him. I remember using the word ‘compassion’ really early on. I asked all about where the compassion was for each other, and he sort of giggled, and I realised that’s our middle class London bubble talking. Talking about compassion is a very normal thing for us. Whereas growing up in a tower block, or losing a job and having nothing in the fridge for two years, compassion is the last thing you’re thinking about. I think they were more interested in survival. I think that was the first reference point for me.

What didn’t you anticipate about the community you learnt about threw the part?

One of the big things he talked about was how you would never grass on someone. So you didn’t complain, you didn’t moan, grass to people other than your own circle. So although there were things you felt uncomfortable about, they would often remain unchanged for a long time.

Is it fair to assume Richard is doing it for cathartic expression, as a way of expressing something that he is still working through?

I don’t think he is doing it for catharsis.. I don’t think he’s the sort of person who needs that catharsis, having met him. I can’t speak for him, but my instinct says he’s just doing this right now, and then he’ll do something else. I think he’s interested in ideas and people and situations. And I know that’s a very strange way of putting it, but he’s not someone who has deep angst in him, as far as I can tell. He’s not someone who has deep pain. The more you ask about his life, the more he giggles about it. He thinks it’s funny that they beat each other up. He thinks it is funny that Ray and Liz and all these pets and pythons and rabbits and budgies. If he does have any hurt about it, he’s not like a haunted person at all, he’s a joyful person. And that’s what is really hard, because a lot of people get into this industry because they’re trying to have this catharsis. I’m sure

If you look at the photos that he’s taken of his family now, over in Swansea, they’re incredibly warm, beautiful pictures of this bucolic family life. On the basis of those pictures, you would believe that he’s living the most sort of idealistic life you can imagine, with beautiful children and a lovely big home. Yes, that’s absolutely right.

So his childhood obviously hasn’t hamstrung his ability to live that sort of very stable life.

Yes, I think so. But I think it’s fair to say Richard doesn’t really process things in the way that we do. And I think that’s why the film is going to be quite arresting. There’s a scene written by Richard of someone throwing hot tea over a budgie. That’s a shocking thing to see, and most people would write that scene because they wanted to dramatise a cruel moment, but he wrote it just because it happened. In that sense, I think he’s putting a series of notable events together, but he’s not making anyone connect any dots. He’s merely saying: ‘oh and this happened’. It’s right next to a scene where Liz is quietly putting together a jigsaw in a puzzle, and those two are equally notable to him. It gives a real clue into who he is.

What’s your defining memory of working with Richard? What sums him up for you?

I remember walking past the local library and Richard just said: ‘I spent my whole childhood in that library’. That helped me understand his experience. He wasn’t in the house, he was out reading, teaching himself about the world.

Is there anything else you’d like to say about the experience?

It was one of the most amazing films that I’ve ever been part of because of how refreshing it was.

INTERVIEW JUSTIN SALINGER

How did you first become involved in the project?

When I first came into contact with the script, I received a link to some of the film Richard had already made. The first part of the film is about Richard’s dad when he was older. I thought the script, and the dialogue, which is the first thing I usually look at, was very beautifully written and incredibly true to life, or what I know of that kind of life. And then the film he had already shot was so beautifully made. Then there’s the photography taken himself, which I thought were absolutely beautiful. So, I was hooked. But I did feel a huge gulf, you know, a massive distance between me and that character. This was set in the Black Country near Birmingham, and me being East London - there is a parallel but those two worlds are so far away. So the first thing I did was just to see if I could find people with that voice. So I located the area, and started to listen people with that accent so I could try and translate some of Richard’s dialogue into speech.

Can you talk me through your impression of Richard?

When I first met him I thought Richard was very economical with his words. He didn’t talk at length about a character, or about thoughts, or about motivations, but very, very directly, abruptly even, in very simple terms. He didn’t mess about. He’d say: ‘my father would do this, my father wouldn’t say that, my father would say it like this’. And that began an acting process – because we were told what a line should sound like, and we would have to find our way to that point. Richard doesn’t have a lot of experience of directing actors, so he goes for the end result, all the time. He would tell you what the final result was expected to be. Whereas some directors would tell you how to get

there, or map out the journey with you, Richard would go straight to the end result. And, actually, that was incredibly invigorating and refreshing. He went straight to the point, and we had to understand how to do what he wanted us to do, and make it was something more than just line reading.

So the job for us often was to take the line readings and find the journey into it. It was wonderful, because when you got it right, when he didn’t say anything, you knew that he was happy, because Richard is not someone to ever hold back.

He’s obviously best known as a photographer. Did you look at the photography of his family? And did that help you in terms of your process as an actor, and discovering the character you played at all?

I think it was really important to look at all of his work, to look at as much as we could. The world was so beautifully depicted in his work that it would be mad to ignore it. It gave you an incredible pathway into finding out who these people were.

I found his documentary on his parents, *Fishtank*, to be incredibly useful. I could see the characters we were going to depict in the film, and they were walking and talking, so you could see how they moved and spoke. Although, again, it opened up a big gulf between myself and the character. I saw the actual person and thought: ‘Well that’s not me, I can’t find that, I can’t reach that’. But it can massively colour what you can bring to it, and inform all of these things, as long as you can let the idea of doing an impersonation go. I think it’s very important to Richard for us not to have done an imitation, or impersonation, but to find our own way, to colour our performance with all those real images we saw.

When I was on set, you were shooting scenes with very minimal dialogue. As an actor, there were long expanses where you don't have to say anything. But then he would give very specific instructions about whether to move your hand, or a minute movement of part of your body. What was it like to work under those conditions?

It was strange, and at first quite alien, and it could make the atmosphere quite tense. He was very specific about the way I was sitting, for example. He would start sentences with things like: 'Ray wouldn't do that, he would sit like this', or 'You should hold your cigarette like this, and just have one drag at the beginning'. He would say: 'One drag of the cigarette, hold it like this, flick it there, move to that side, look at the screen'. It was very detailed work, and the first take I remember feeling incredibly tense, and thinking a thousand things in my head even though there was no dialogue. I had to lean forward here, cross my legs here, breath here, and the silence became incredibly intense. I remember feeling nervous and at the end he'd say, 'You need to relax'. And I'd say, 'Oh do I?' The second time I remember thinking, 'OK I've got this, this is fine, I can do this'. Eventually, I was able to find freedom in all those very prescriptive directions. As the film progressed, I got more and more used to the language, to being able to work like that, and I found it very, very rewarding, and an exciting way of working.

If you could meet Ray, if I could bring him into the room you're in now, and you could ask him a question, what would you ask him?

I think I'd probably ask him if he had any regrets, or what his biggest disappointment or mistake was, that he felt he'd made in his life. I think that would be the biggest question to ask - what would you have done differently? There was a moment in Ray's life which I feel was a trigger for many things. When he was made redundant, he took his redundancy money and lived his life quite well, and then the money ran out, and things in his life changed. Did it lead to his alcoholism, or unhappiness in life? But when you watch *Fishtank*, they live all their lives, they're vocal, they talk it all out, they argue, they thrash it around, they're certainly alive and full of emotion.

When Richard talks about his father, he often refers to his Dad, as Ray, as a hermit or a recluse, but he doesn't judge him in any way, and he doesn't seem to consider whether they were sad, or was depressed, or was unhappy.

I know. Ella and I were constantly baffled by the detached way with which Richard talks about his parents. I remember Ella mentioned the word compassion one day, and being compassionate, and he sort of said, 'there was no compassion, there was no passion'. So there was no emotion, even sadness, even anger. That's what their lives were, and they just got on with it. And Richard feels very much that he's in that gang, that that's just what it was, there's no point feeling sad about it or sorry for them, or wallowing in the misery that must have been their lives.

It sounds like he didn't have time for self-reflection.

But I think he accepts that, and he doesn't judge them, and I don't think he's angry with them, and I think it's a brilliant way of approaching it. Yet, he's obviously wants to look more closely. He's done his photographs, now he's making a film, so there's something there that's moving him on to make this art and work. And yet, when he talks about it he's very dispassionate about it, and straightforward about it, so it's a contradiction in terms, to want to make this film and these pictures and his art, and so obviously he does have something to say about it, but he can't express it with words. He has to express it with his film.

Were you able to gain an understanding of the contradiction between his reticence to talk about it in quantitative terms, but then clearly returning to it, again and again, in a way that suggests he is maybe obsessed by it.

That contradiction was a key part of the experience we had making the film. Ella and I would talk about at how little he wanted to go to a place that was difficult or emotional. But we didn't think he was struggling. He just had a way of dismissing it very lightly.



Biography

In 1997 he was the first recipient of the Deutsche Borse Photography Prize and the following year BBC2 broadcast his film *Fishtank*, (47mins) produced by Artangel and filmmaker Adam Curtis. He exhibited at the Venice Biennale 2001 and was nominated for the Turner Prize, also 2001.

He has made work about his immediate family, about animals in zoos around the world and about the British landscape. Recently he has written and directed his first feature film for cinema called 'Ray & Liz', shot on location in the Midlands where he grew up.

His work is held in many collections including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum, New York, V & A and Tate Galleries, London.



Filmography

- *Fishtank* (1998) - documentary video, 47 minutes, commissioned by Artangel and Adam Curtis for BBC television and shown on BBC Two in December 1998[1][17]
- *Liz Smoking* (1998) - short documentary video
- *Tony Smoking Backwards* (1998) – short documentary video
- *Ray in Bed* (1999) - short documentary video
- *Playstation* (1999) - short documentary video
- *Ray* (2016), written and directed by Billingham - 30 minutes, part 1 of 3-part feature film



Cast

Ella Smith, Justin Salinger, Patrick Romer, Deirdre Kelly,
Tony Way, Sam Gittins, Joshua Millard-Lloyd

Crew

Director: Richard Billingham

Producer: Jacqui Davies

DOP: Daniel Landin

Editor: Tracy Granger

Sound: Joakim Sundström

Production Designer: Beck Rainford

Production: Primitive Film

World sales: Luxbox



LUXBOX

film

BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

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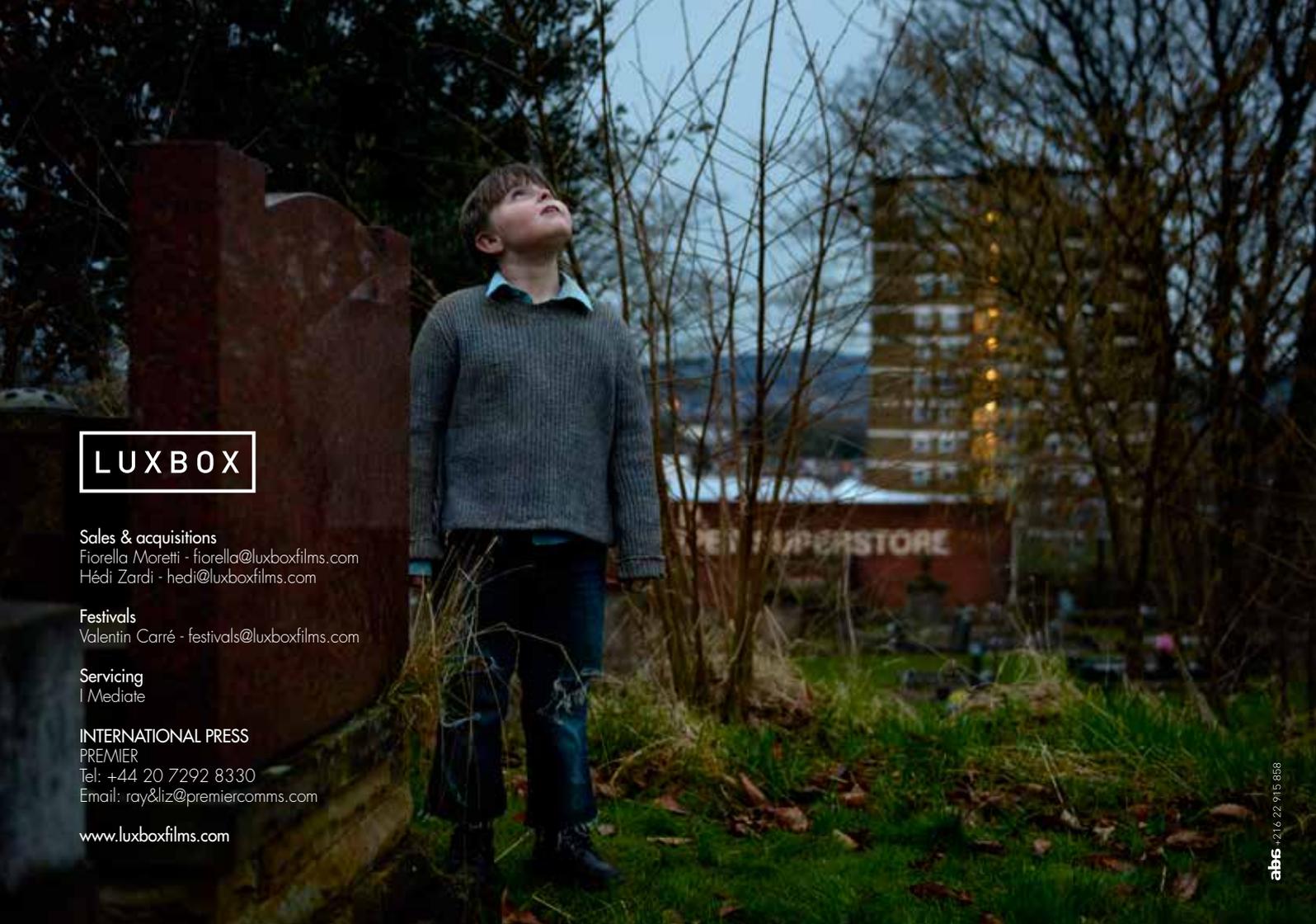
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