For twenty years, Bruno and Malik have been living in a world apart, the world of autistic children and teenagers. Their respective associations train youngsters from difficult neighborhoods to care for these cases categorized as “extremely complex”. A special partnership for special personalities.
How did this film come into being?

Éric Toledano: THE SPECIALS is the fruit of a twenty-year-old commitment. In 1994, we were monitors at a summer camp and I had to get a diploma to become a director (BAFD). That is where I met Stéphane Benhamou, the creator of the association “Le Silence des Justes”, specialized in caring for autistic children and adolescents and integrating them into society. We lost sight of each other. But he later took an autistic member of my family under his wing. One day Olivier and I decided to take a look at the summer camp he ran in the mountains. We were deeply impressed by the energy and humanity that Stéphane and his team exuded. The chemistry between the young caregivers and the handicapped kids completely overwhelmed us.

Olivier Nakache: A little later, Stéphane needed a 6-minute film to present his association. He hoped to collect funds, because he was having trouble obtaining the necessary aids. So we took our little camera and both went to Saint-Denis, to the same place where twenty years later we were to film THE SPECIALS. We met a young educator, Daoud Tatou, who also worked with autistic youngsters. And once again, this new experience remained profoundly etched in our minds. We already said to ourselves, what a magnificent context for telling a story and making a film. But we were just starting out and we humbly thought we didn’t yet have the wherewithal to handle a subject like this. We were simply not ready yet. That did not keep us from remaining close to these guys for whom we felt strong friendship and a real affinity. Four years ago, Canal+ offered us carte blanche for 26 minutes. We naturally chose to showcase their work and careers with a documentary entitled WE SHOULD MAKE A FILM ABOUT IT...

Olivier Nakache: ...a documentary about Stéphane and Daoud who in the meantime had become director of the association “Le Relais IDF”. This organisation also cares for autistic youngsters, but that also advocates the social and professional integration of youngsters from underprivileged neighborhoods. It’s true that between each of our feature films,
The SPECIALS is probably a compendium of all the obsessions that run through our films: a group at work, primarily by the fact that they are forever on the move. One of the “powers that be” no longer work. But Bruno acts. And he got an inspection because of his sidestepping the law. We found our angle for the film. We discover almost by chance that Bruno (Vincent Cassel), the character inspired by Stéphane Benhamou, is Jewish. As we later discover that his alter ego, Malik (Reda Kateb who plays the role of Daoud Tatou) is a Moslem. You never dwell on this subject…

Éric Toledano: If you describe the different situations, religion and identity politics fade away to the benefit of humanity. That much is visible to the naked eye. Humanity transcends all. We may have “idealized” our impressions, but over 2 years we had the time to understand that what counts, improving the lives of these innumerable youngsters.

We look for those two characters and are about what it is important to question. In that sense, Transgression may be chaotic, but it is fertile. We have within the film we don’t have a screenplay, but we suggest that our characters. That was a way of structuring our story and how did you proceed?

Éric Toledano: For 2 years, we immersed ourselves in the two associations. The scenes in the film, including Valentin’s running away, are all real life experiences.

Olivier Nakache: The idea was also to include real monitors and real autistic youngsters in the film, to fuel the fiction we wanted to create. These associations work with a long time. Before we even write a single line, we need to have an idea for the film. We have been fans of those two actors for a long time. Before we even write a single line, we need an open-mindedness, around the clock. So all that matters is the idea of making this film kept coming up between

The idea of making this film kept coming up between us. It gained ground and the contact we kept with the idea of making this film kept coming up between us. It gained ground and the contact we kept with the two associations since the year 2000 no doubt affected us. Now our sensitivity to handicaps and contributed to the existence of a film like THE INTOUCHABLES.

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Éric Toledano: We understand that without understanding it completely, without being in possession of all the complex issues. We needed to assimilate the subject technically in order to fuel the fiction we wanted to create.

Olivier Nakache: We feel that the audience should almost be grabbed by the arm. Besides the music that runs around does make sense. We wanted to have an open-mindedness, around the clock. So all that matters is the idea of making this film kept coming up between us. It gained ground and the contact we kept with the two associations since the year 2000 no doubt affected us. Now our sensitivity to handicaps and contributed to the existence of a film like THE INTOUCHABLES.

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Olivier Nakache: It was impossible for us to tackle this subject without understanding it completely, without being in possession of all the complex issues. We needed to assimilate the subject technically in order to fuel the fiction we wanted to create.

Éric Toledano: Out of necessity, Bruno breaks some rules, opens an electrocardiogram. That’s the whole subject of the film. What defines marginality and what defines normality? What you spend two hours with us in one of the associations. If you don’t have the time, or the desire, we’ll stay right then and there. No problem. Otherwise, we’ll go together.

Once you decided to shoot, how did you work?

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and if you’ve had enough after an hour, we won’t hold it against you.” But essentially we weren’t running any risks. All you have to do is spend a few minutes at “Silence des Justes” or “Relais IDF”, for something very powerful to happen. We were convinced that we held the right formula. They came, and that very evening both texted us pretty much the same message: “We don’t need a screenplay to continue on with this adventure with you”.

Éric Toledano: That was a shot in the arm. We introduced them to each other. They didn’t know each other, but wanted to work together.

In the film, Malik (Reda Kateb) teaches his caregivers etiquette, French and punctuality…

Olivier Nakache: He gives them a global formation, “you come, you accept the rules, you are formed, and you’ll see, you’ll come out a winner”. He’s gifted with intelligence, instinct and the gift of the gab. He gives them the keys to work with, but also to make themselves respected by society and find their place in it.

These caregivers are mostly from the universe of diversity present in all your films…

Olivier Nakache: Diversity is one of the main components of their associations. Most of the caregivers are from underprivileged neighborhoods. They are familiar with violence and take it from their autistic charges, without turning it against them. And for someone who does not count for much in our society, becoming a caregiver is a very interesting parable. Besides, we discovered among them some true acting talent! It was obvious to us: they had to play in the film.

And Bryan Mialoundama who plays Dylan?

Olivier Nakache: We immediately sensed his sincerity during the auditions. He wasn’t acting. He reminded us of the caregivers who show up at Stéphane or Daoud’s. He had unbelievable eyes, and you could sense the violence and truth within him. He was a like a block of marble waiting to be carved.

Éric Toledano: We needed an outside look in order to enter into the story. Dylan is the one who doesn’t know, who asks questions like why is this autistic kid hitting me just after giving me a hug? He is the audience’s eye.

How did you find the autistic kids who play in the film?

Éric Toledano: “Scrolling” through all the associations of Paris and the Paris region, we had a hit on Turbulences (an arts group that employs people who have...
communication issues, suffer from autism or related issues). The ESAT (Establishment of Service Aid Through Work) is located in a circus tent at the Porte d’Asnières, and we offered to create a theater workshop. It was in that workshop that we met Benjamin Lesieur, who plays Joseph. He has a very winning personality. He didn’t speak, or he communicated in a random fashion, citing names of French singers or asking the same question over and over again: “what did the weather man have to say tonight?” We quickly realized that he enjoyed the workshop. We started treating him like any other actor: we offered him the role. His parents warned us it would be complicated. He never wore a tie, a belt or socks, and he couldn’t stand anyone touching his skin and hair. But they agreed. During the 25 days of shooting, we got him into a tie, belt and socks, we made him up and did his hair. We figured out that Benjamin really liked the costume crew, Isabelle and especially the dresser, Marine. They are the one who used niceness and psychology to get him to wear the clothes they wanted him to. Marine wound up playing the role of Brigitte, the young employee at the company where Joseph works. No one else could do it. She objected “but I’m not an actress!”. We told her “Trust us…” And she was perfect.

Olivier Nakache: During the shoot, we asked Benjamin, “Do that again, get back into place, go back to the beginning, come on, we’re going to do another take…” and he was perfect, just like all the other professional actors. Talking with the doctors, we realized that the cinema uses a very autistic-like process of repetition: supervised and repetitive. We organized the entire preparation around Benjamin. We showed him the sets before filming. We rehearsed scenes with him. At the same time, he could say anything he wanted. He sometimes put his head on a technician’s shoulder. We were ourselves experiencing exactly what we were talking about in the film.

Éric Toledano: He was soon our buddy, and we even stole some ideas from him. The line “I am innocent!” for example, comes from him. He loved repeating certain dialogues in a loop, and we kept some of them, like “We’re not far!” Benjamin soon became the film’s mascot, and the dance scene profoundly moved the entire technical crew.

And Valentin (Marco Locatelli)?

Éric Toledano: His brother is autistic. A very serious case as a matter of fact. Astoundingly mature, Marco came to the casting session without telling anyone, explaining, “I have a little brother who’s autistic. Making this movie will help me
come closer to him, help me to love him”. He did some convincing screen tests, and we explained to him that there were going to be quite a few working sessions with us and some behavioral coaches. We spoke to his mother about it, who said: “It’s up to him. I have total trust in you”. Marco’s presence made sense to us.

You try several times to make us understand Valentin’s autistic sensations in a very sensorial way…

Olivier Nakache: You can’t depict what someone autistic feels or sees. But what we are sure about, is that such children focus on certain sounds. Some calm them, others aggress them. We wanted to try to reproduce that without using too many effects in order to adopt his own point of view, his own subjectivity.

Éric Toledano: We had to confront reality: a hospital discharge after six months of confinement. All the doctors told us: you don’t get out like that, you have to set up gradual releases. You start with once a week for three months before risking a definitive release. That is why Malik (Reda Kateb) chooses to assign Dylan as Valentin’s caregiver. Their technique is 1 for 1. Despite Dylan’s clumsiness, something worked. It’s chemistry. It doesn’t always work, that’s for sure, but when it does work, it’s mighty impressive.

Did you have to deal with any crises on the set? Olivier Nakache: Yes, but we had to manage them, and we absolutely wanted to show that part of the truth in the film. In any event, we had to endlessly adapt, improvise. Especially during group scenes like the skating rink, for example. There were always three cameras on location, permanently ready to film.

Hélène Vincent plays Benjamin’s confused mother…

Éric Toledano: We share a long history with Hélène that began with SAMBA. This actor, whom we are particularly fond of, has a kind of double nationality: she can be very moving in one film and very funny in the next. She is a very SPECIAL actor! We could not make this film without giving the floor to the parents. We often heard the words that Hélène’s character pronounces: “What will happen to him when I’m no longer here? They are cute when they’re little, but when they grow up, people no longer look at the same”. When the diagnosis of autism comes in, parents do not have time to think of the future, they are all fired up for immediate combat. There is no possible remission. You’re in for 30, 40, 50 years. The world is then split in two: those who help you and those who won’t even look at you.

You often say “Behind the laughter, there are tears”, you could almost turn that around: “Behind the tears, there is laughter”? Éric Toledano: Comedy is sometimes sadness in disguise, but more than that, it is our way to express ourselves and communicate with each other. In these associations, you run through an entire gamut of emotions, laughter obviously being one of them. It just has to fit into the situation intelligently. As with Bruno, who accumulates romantic trysts with women of the Jewish community, organized by his entourage that would like to see him marry. Being humorous is also being Special, or in other words breaking the rules, and of course it takes the sting out of certain situations. Taking a step back, keeping some distance.

Like in C’EST LA VIE, the film ends on a very poetic scene…

Olivier Nakache: That scene is a perfect illustration of the overall gist of the film. The context may be harsh, but poetry, movement and music prevail. At the end of his choreography, Joseph returns to the center of the circle around which he was dancing. Alone under the lights, he incarnates all our characters’ combating: keeping these kids, adolescents and adults in the center of things, never losing sight of them, and never banishing them from our daily lives.

Éric Toledano: Benjamin is truly poetic. For 2 years, we were constantly surprised. By a kid with autism who at dinner eats off your own plate. This group of autistic kids dances, each with his and her own pathology, each in their own world, but all of them together. When Bruno isn’t even looking at you, all the others who watch his association, they watch those kids dance and feel moved. And we also feel especially our own ourself what we felt throughout our preparation for the shoot, and what we tried to reconstitute throughout the film.
What was your first contact like with Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache?
When they first offered me the film, they explained to me how important it was to them... They had had the project for a long time, but did not yet feel totally ready to direct it. I remember, they had not yet written a single line when we first met. I just asked them not to make me read 12,000 drafts of the screenplay. I explained that I was in no hurry, and that I would wait for them.

Had you wanted to work with them?
Yes, and I told them so. I was very curious. I knew their work, I saw what they were able to do, but I did not really know how they managed to do it. I quickly understood. They have faith in their screenplay, but they keep on searching for stuff all the time. For me, true actor’s direction is the way a director, or in this case, two directors look at an actor. They discerned something in me that I did not suspect was there, things I didn’t know I was capable of “bringing out”.

Do you remember your first visit to the association “The Silence des Justes”?
I was rather discombobulated. But also completely overcome. I was surprised to find myself in tears. I asked myself: “How am I going to work with these kids, these teens and these adults? How will I detach myself from these sometimes very serious cases of autism?” Observing Stéphane and our contacts there, I understood that they dedicated their lives to bettering those of their “residents”, at the price of their own. Unsentimentally. They are “doers”. The autistic suffer from an inability to communicate. But when you stimulate them, you can enrich their sensory baggage. In other words, a guy who has spent twenty years in this officially recognized not-for-profit organization does not look the same as someone who is just starting out.

How did you shake off those fears you mentioned?
I had to face up to my own issues. I spent time with them, and especially I stopped being such a crybaby. I told myself time and again that I should not be afraid to step up to the front lines and get slapped in the face two or three times. Some of them
are actually pretty burly. One day, Eric and Olivier took me to be interviewed by the Papotin, a paper put out by the IGAS inspectors. We had to drag him there. His work is so urgent. Altruism? Humanism? The “Shidduchim” are the pretext for some ratherBan of super heroes 19-20 years old who do a job that doesn’t go into the woes of the inner city. They show a little bit of cunning in his attitude? In Brazil, they have an expression for that: you need to know how to cry to obtain some very powerful emotional demonstrations.

The dance scene is crazy poetic…

Some of them dance. Some play the piano. Others slam, one detail, that no one can follow them anymore. Others encounter Bruno constantly screws up. You become a couple when you feel like you want to. He has so much about religion? It’s in there with the kippas, veils and mezuzot. Some of the journalists. Some of them dance. Some play the piano. Others slam, one day, during a workshop, I saw one of them lying in a booth with the little lights they light up to stimulate the autistic. 15 years ago, he didn’t express himself because he couldn’t speak, but what intelligence in his eyes – the eyes of the Little Prince – they transfix you. What lurks behind those eyes? What can his thought processes be like? The film asks a basic question: should you upset norms? Anyone who doesn’t think differently.

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You often say that each of your films is a voyage. How did this one start?

I immediately felt “chemically” confident with Éric and Olivier, who came to see me in the small café where I hang out in Montreuil. I felt that in spite of the considerable success of their films, they too shared this idea of a voyage. The desire to always put the counters at zero, to consider each feature film your first. I understood the force, the restlessness, the “electric charge” that animated them: paying tribute to the work of Stéphane Benhamou and Daoud Tatou. I got carried away when I screened their documentary: ON DEVRAIT EN FAIRE UN FILM. I didn’t know anything about autism other than what I saw in films like RAIN MAN or SHINE. Here it was a question of playing with “non-verbal autistic youngsters”. Olivier took me to visit “Le Silence des Justes”. I was immediately captivated, but also very touched. I discovered a very rich world that promised an intense adventure in which I would move freely. Éric et Olivier make a big deal out of the actor’s freedom. They are very committed to it.

Interview

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Your character, Malik, is inspired by Daoud Tatou, how did you work with him?

Before even reading the script, I got into one of those vans that pick up autistic kids each morning at their family homes to drive them to their activities. I went to play soccer with them in a gym and to lunch at “Le Relais IDF”. His association. Then Daoud took me to Morocco, to Rabat and especially Oujda, where he is building the first center for the autistic in North Africa. Like “Le Silence des Justes”, it has a magnificent name: “Les Oiseaux du Paradis” (Birds of Paradise). The situation of the autistic is even worse there than here in France. So we went to visit a family with several autistic children. One of them was tied to the wall. I spent the following night staring at pictures of my 4-year-old son on my phone. When you see the distress of some situations and the humane response that Stéphane and Daoud bring, a kind of responsibility begins to weigh on you at the idea of playing them. Some kind of validation on their part was important to me. I received their blessing, but I also had to free myself from them, because THE SPECIALS is not a biopic about Stéphane and Daoud.

Reda Kateb
Where did you find your freedom? In the points of convergence between Daoud and myself. Empathy, dynamism, endurance. And uncomplicated relations with kids from neighborhoods I never got very far away from. I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine. I sponsor a movie festival, “Ciné-banlieues”. Talking to them or listening to them was not a role of composition role for me. All I had to do was to draw on my day-to-day experiences. Before “stumbling across” Daoud, I had never really known kids with African origins, a very serious case. He smiled at me he ran away. Don’t purloin anything from them. We actors sometimes do. Will people like what I’m doing? Will this role bring me others? All that stuff that interferes with our work. With them, you have to find another type of communication. During Benjamin’s dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

The cause always comes first. Faith is also very important to them. I think that today everything is reduced to religion. I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris subway. I would very much like to attend the inauguration of the Oujda center and screen THE SPECIALS in an open-air cinema: like always, they are the ones who suffer most. In life, should we go about breaking with norms? Absolutely. At the origin of this project is a paradox. It involves the Ministry of the Environment that on the one hand does not want to approve these organizations, but on the other hand, implicitly realizes that no one else could do the work they do and that they are indispensable. In the middle of all that, there is a certain camaraderie. Once we heard the word “lights”, we were on the starting-blocks.

The film is also a comedy, but you didn’t have that much comedy to do, or did you? Music, humor, color, noise, dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

What was it like meeting Vincent Cassel? Without a word, he opened up to others, but in its rightful place, a little as it should be everywhere you go. He accepted traveling with me on the film in another language… He always changed things through it. With him, in the end closed doors always open.

What is it like meeting Vincent Cassel? When we met, we were on the starting-blocks. He was the first one to arrive, before the monitors. The film is a parable about the origins of all that. They do not have any minorities, nor any other kind of handicap. They are lives: autistic kids, but also their families. For them, the deflagration is terrible, and they are the most precarious – they cannot keep their children. They need that breath of fresh air. –like always, they are the ones who suffer most.

You talk a lot about ethics regarding your artistic choices… I never accept a role I didn’t agree with. Today I would never accept a role I didn’t agree with. Today I want that breath of fresh air. –like always, they are the ones who suffer most.

The film is also a comedy, but you didn’t have that much comedy to do, or did you? I didn’t have to tame them, they had to tame me. Their caregivers work on every word, every gesture. And nothing can ever be taken for granted. On set, it was a joy to see him send back the balls I sent him, with the warm heart and spontaneity that are his trademark. He always left me open-mouthed. We always said goodbye with a handshake that interferes with our work. With them, you have to find another type of communication. During Benjamin’s dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

Exactly. Did you speak with the directors about the issue of religion, which is just hinted at in the film? We spoke about it as early as our first meetings. I was a little worried before I received the screenplay. I was afraid of the cliché of the sacred union of Jews and Arabs working together. I was afraid that the film would also be with elbow jabs and headbutts. There is nothing violent about the origins of all that. They do not have any minorities, nor any other kind of handicap. They are lives: autistic kids, but also their families. For them, the deflagration is terrible, and they are the most precarious – they cannot keep their children. They need that breath of fresh air. –like always, they are the ones who suffer most.

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Where did you find your freedom? In the points of convergence between Daoud and myself. Empathy, dynamism, endurance. And uncomplicated relations with kids from neighborhoods I never got very far away from. I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine. I sponsor a movie festival, “Ciné-banlieues”. Talking to them or listening to them was not a role of composition role for me. All I had to do was to draw on my day-to-day experiences. Before “stumbling across” Daoud, I had never really known kids with African origins, a very serious case. He smiled at me he ran away. Don’t purloin anything from them. We actors sometimes do. Will people like what I’m doing? Will this role bring me others? All that stuff that interferes with our work. With them, you have to find another type of communication. During Benjamin’s dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

The cause always comes first. Faith is also very important to them. I think that today everything is reduced to religion. I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris subway. I would very much like to attend the inauguration of the Oujda center and screen THE SPECIALS in an open-air cinema: like always, they are the ones who suffer most. In life, should we go about breaking with norms? Absolutely. At the origin of this project is a paradox. It involves the Ministry of the Environment that on the one hand does not want to approve these organizations, but on the other hand, implicitly realizes that no one else could do the work they do and that they are indispensable. In the middle of all that, there is a certain camaraderie. Once we heard the word “lights”, we were on the starting-blocks.

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When and how did you create your two associations, “Le Silence des Justes”, and “Le Relais IDF”?

Stéphane Benhamou: I discovered autism in 1992, when I took in a teenager who suffered from it at the summer camp I directed. I created “Le Silence des Justes” four years later. Autism was recognized as a public health problem in April of 1995, but there were no structures for dealing with it. So the delay was considerable, and it still is. At first we opened an ordinary facility, and then we specialized. We obtained our first authorization in 2007. But the association was truly given a “boost” in 2010 when a magistrate entrusted us with a first autistic case. That is how the first round-the-clock medicalized emergency structure was born. Today, 59 “residents” live in our apartments.

Daoud Tatou: “Le Relais IDF” was created in 2000. As of that date, the association has taken care of the complex cases we give precedence to on the weekends. Stéphane and I then extended our presence to weekdays too. I have been working with Stéphane since 1996, when I ran into him at the Théâtre Le Lucernaire in Paris where I was putting on plays with autistic youngsters. A friend asked me to organize some workshops. My career has been different from Stéphane’s. I was a monitor-educator, and then I worked with Howard Buten – an American psychologist who specializes in autism, a writer and a clown. We soon began to run the experiment together on complex cases at Stéphane’s summer camp. Because I came from an underprivileged neighborhood, I had the idea of putting young people from the same neighborhoods to work taking care of people affected by the disease.

What has kept you going all these years?

Stéphane Benhamou: The first autistic case I met was a teenager unable to communicate. I wanted to understand why. I opened my summer camp to him.
When he left, he asked if he could come again. Ali Daoud and I did say the requests that came rolling in.

Daoud Tatou: I was 17 when I “stumbled across” autism. I am now 45. I didn’t understand the violence of autistic people. How could they suddenly rear up and smash everything without any warning? I searched, and I’m still searching for an answer.

Listening to you, it sounds like everything was built up gradually without any warnings. Ali Daoud: Nothing was planned. At the start, we grew without a blueprint. Then I set up “Le Relais IDF”, but you still have to haggle in an Ubuesque situation… (General Inspection of Social Affairs), but you still receive a favorable report from the IGAS. We actually got two favorable reports from the IGAS in 2000 to 2010, Daoud Tatou: Those autism spectrum disorders cover a very broad field: co-morbidities, epilepsy, violence… We slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for the deficiencies of the political powers that provide with too few means.

You received a favorable report from the IGAS (General Inspection of Social Affairs), but you still have to haggle in an Ubuesque situation—

Stéphane Benhamou: The autistic community made us what we are today. We filled in the gaps, we slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for the deficiencies of the political powers that provide with too few means.

The film shows how institutions select their autistic cases. Do you choose those you take in?—

Stéphane Benhamou: These autism spectrum disorders cover a very broad field: co-morbidities, epilepsy, violence… We slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for the deficiencies of the political powers that provide with too few means.

Stéphane Benhamou: Once the obligatory observation period has passed - because that does exist - some institutions do in fact refuse to accept autistic patients that they do not fit in with them. We accept everyone, once an ASD (Autism spectrum disorder) diagnosis has been made, provided that we can cover the social security and insurance funds, space or certifications.

Daoud Tatou: When someone knocks at our door, we open it. But the politicians implore us: “Leave your cases that you can’t provide for! The selection is a very real phenomenon. Directors of the structures receive a global budgetary envelope for the year with a ratio of one educator for 3 cases, one educator for 6, but when we are dealing with complex cases, we need one caregiver per patient and one must think that there are short 37 000 places. That means 37 000 children out in the cold. An institution will take the case that sleeps all day, knocks out by pay. Suddenly everyone is putting in different directions to cover themselves. They send us the police of the police which is to say the IGAS, and they spend a month going over the association with a fine tooth comb. We finally can receive autistic cases and train our youngsters. They recognized that we fill a gap. Stéphane Benhamou: But we receive no supplementary funds, space or certifications.

The film shows how institutions select their autistic cases. Do you choose those you take in?—

Stéphane Benhamou: We and our teams then examine the feasibility of treatment and we go to work. We never turn anyone away.

Daoud Tatou: When someone knocks at our door, we open it. But the politicians implore us: “Leave your cases that you can’t provide for! The selection is a very real phenomenon. Directors of the structures receive a global budgetary envelope for the year with a ratio of one educator for 3 cases, one educator for 6, but when we are dealing with complex cases, we need one caregiver per patient and one must think that there are short 37 000 places. That means 37 000 children out in the cold. An institution will take the case that sleeps all day, knocks out by pay. Suddenly everyone is putting in different directions to cover themselves. They send us the police of the police which is to say the IGAS, and they spend a month going over the association with a fine tooth comb. We finally can receive autistic cases and train our youngsters. They recognized that we fill a gap. Stéphane Benhamou: But we receive no supplementary funds, space or certifications.

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for “Le Silence des Justes”. They became very emotional. And they’ve never abandoned the association since. Even after they became famous with THE INTOUCHABLES, they came back to see us. They followed us and helped us in all the many situations we went through.

Daoud Tatou: We were involved in it. We were overwhelmed by the film. We said to ourselves: we were able to do all that – a half drop of water in the ocean we have to fill – but we still have just as many problems.

Stéphane Benhamou: I also thought of the families, Eric and Olivier finally lift the veil on the treatment of autistic people. 37,000 families still live a nightmare in the dark, second after second, 24 hours a day. When the diagnosis comes in, there is no more family or life. The families are left in angst-ridden isolation.

Daoud Tatou: Worse yet. Certain aging parents have told us: “I am going to kill myself, and take him with me. I don’t want him to end up in a psychiatric hospital after my death. I fought all my life to keep him out of there.” First, it’s the couple that breaks down. Then the siblings. The parents – and it’s understandable – will often concentrate all their efforts on the autistic child, often to the detriment of the others, who feel neglected. But it also impacts family finances: unless the child is cared for, many parents have to stop working and find themselves in a fine mess.

The film also focuses very closely on the monitors…

Daoud Tatou: That is also very realistic. We were able to set up a structure with the monitors being made up of neighborhood teenagers. At first, they didn’t want to clean up human excrement or get punched in the face. We insisted on creating a formula and imagined something that could last. If we were able to make our municipal politicians sensitive to the handicapped, it might also encourage inserting young people into the sector of care giving, in old people’s homes, for example. That is to say doing thankless jobs no one wants to do. The neighborhood recruiting grounds are waiting for something like that. We even had youngsters hired at the AP-HP, the psychiatric hospitals of the Île-de-France. We did not come with the help of the law. It was all done empirically, with humor and humanity. We have to conserve that vitality and empathy.

Did you immediately accept the idea of the film?

Stéphane Benhamou: We agreed once our psychiatrists validated the scenario. Unlike what you may sometimes hear here...
and there, we are responsible people. Everything was very transparent. And we did not change anything about the way we operate. We did not adapt ourselves to the film, the film adapted to us.

Daoud Tatou: But it is the first feature film with real autistic people and real caregivers.

You had to accept the presence of two actors: Vincent Cassel and Reda Kateb?

Stéphane Benhamou: At our first meeting, I could tell that Vincent was interested: he asked a lot of questions. And he approached the children. I didn’t feel like I was dealing with an actor. He was “caught up”. But I did not adapt my work to his schedule. He adapted his to mine.

Daoud Tatou: It was the same with Reda. A real human being, and, especially, very sensitive. I suggested that he accompany me to Morocco – I am in charge of an NGO that works with autism – telling him: “If you want to understand, come eat stones with me.” Neither Vincent nor Reda ever acted like stars. We spoke to them like Stéphane and I speak to the CEOs we occasionally meet: “You have money, we have autistic people. What can we come up with together?” What we look at are the technicalities. Who can bring what to our combat?

Stéphane Benhamou: That’s true, but when I see Reda Kateb, I see Daoud.

Daoud Tatou: And when I see Vincent Cassel, I see him mimicking Stéphane.

What are you expecting from this film?

Stéphane Benhamou: That it casts light on our complex cases, even if things are beginning to move and the administration is waking up. Today we see the prospect of more appropriate treatment. I told Eric and Olivier: “I hope that there will be a before and after THE SPECIALS.”

Daoud Tatou: And that it may touch the politicians. We would like the film to raise the awareness of all deciders, and even of the President of the French Republic.
Directed by ............................ Éric TOLEDANO et Olivier NAKACHE
Screenplay by ............................ Éric TOLEDANO et Olivier NAKACHE
Production Company .................. QUAD et TEN CINEMA
En coproduction avec ............... GAUMONT, TF1 FILMS PRODUCTION, BELGA PRODUCTIONS, 120 FILMS
In coproduction with ............... CANAL+, OCS, TFI, CINE+
Produced by ............................. Nicolas DUVAL ADASSOVSKY
Executive Producer .................. Hervé RUET
Artistic collaboration ............... Mathieu VADEPIED
Editor ........................................ Dorian RIGAL-ANSOUS
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Sound ........................................ Pascal ARMANT
................................................ Selim AZZAZI
................................................ Jean-Paul HURIER
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................................................ Marie-France MICHEL
Set design ................................. Julia LEMAIRE
Continuity ............................... Christelle MEAUX
Location Manager ..................... Amaury SEREYE
Costume design ....................... Isabelle PANNETIER
1st Assistant Director .............. Mathieu VAILLANT
Original Music .......................... Vincent PIANT

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