



ROMANA
MAGGIORA VERGANO

A FILM BY
PAOLO STRIPPOLI

FANDANGO NIGHT SWIM SP OK Festival Cinema e Audiovisivo COSENA ITALIA TV Confindustria dell'Unione europea REGIONE LAZIO IO SONO FIDELI VENEZIA GAZZETTA GREEN FILM FANDANGO





OUT OF COMPETITION

VISION DISTRIBUTION, FANDANGO and NIGHTSWIM

Present

THE HOLY BOY

(LA VALLE DEI SORRISI)

a film by

Paolo Strippoli

starring

Michele Riondino

Paolo Pierobon, Romana Maggiora Vergano

Sergio Romano, Anna Bellato, Sandra Toffolatti

and **Roberto Citran**

introducing

Giulio Feltri

An Italy-Slovenia coproduction between

FANDANGO, VISION DISTRIBUTION and NIGHTSWIM with **SPOK**

in collaboration with **SKY**

Produced by

Domenico Procacci and Laura Paolucci

Ines Vasilevic and Stefano Sardo

Co-Produced by

Jožko Rutar and Miha Černec

with the support of

REGIONE LAZIO

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OPERA REALIZZATA CON IL CONTRIBUTO DEL FONDO PER LO SVILUPPO DEGLI INVESTIMENTI NEL CINEMA E NELL'AUDIOVISIVO

CREDITS NOT CONTRACTUAL

CREDITS

Director

PAOLO STRIPPOLI

Based on the screenplay "L'angelo infelice", winner of the 2019 Solinas Prize by

JACOPO DEL GIUDICE, PAOLO STRIPPOLI, MILO TISSONE

Screenplay

JACOPO DEL GIUDICE, PAOLO STRIPPOLI, MILO TISSONE

Director of Photography

CRISTIANO DI NICOLA

Editor

FEDERICO PALMERINI

Scenografia

MARCELLO DI CARLO

Costumes

SUSANNA MASTROIANNI

Make-Up Artist

VALENTINA TOMLIJANOVIC, ANDREA LEANZA, DENISE BOCCACCI

Hair Stylist

ARIANNA PALMUCCI

Casting

ANNA PENNELLA (UICD)

Sound

FRANCESCO MOROSINI

Original Music

FEDERICO BISOZZI, DAVIDE TOMAT

Assistant Director

GIAIME GRECO

Production Manager

ELIA MAZZONI

Executive Producers

IVAN FIORINI e ATTILIO MORO

Produced by

DOMENICO PROCACCI and LAURA PAOLUCCI

INES VASILEVIC and STEFANO SARDO

Co-Produced by

JOŽKO RUTAR and MIHA ČERNEC

A production of

FANDANGO, VISION DISTRIBUTION and NIGHTSWIM

with **SPOK**

in collaboration with

SKY

International Sales

FANDANGO SALES

Italian Distribution

VISION DISTRIBUTION

Runtime: 122 min.

CAST

MICHELE RIONDINO

as Sergio Rossetti

introducing

GIULIO FELTRI

as Matteo Corbin

PAOLO PIEROBON

as Mauro Corbin

ROMANA MAGGIORA VERGANO

as Michela

SERGIO ROMANO

as Pichler

ANNA BELLATO

as Anna

SANDRA TOFFOLATTI

as Elisabetta Gengo

GABRIELE BENEDETTI

as Franco

DIEGO NARDINI

as Lorenzo Berni

and

ROBERTO CITRAN

as Don Attilio

SYNOPSIS

When Sergio, a teacher tormented by his past, is transferred to Remis, a secluded village known as the happiest town in Italy, it seems the perfect place for a new start. But Sergio soon discovers that behind the town's joyful facade lies a dark and disturbing secret. Each week, the villagers gather to meet Matteo, an introverted fifteen-year old. They say Matteo is an angel whose embrace can free one of all pain and sorrow. But as Sergio realizes the village's relationship to the young man is not as benevolent as it seems, his attempt to save Matteo awakens the darker side of the community, and the boy everyone calls the angel of Remis.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

"The Holy Boy" was born from a desire to explore horror not merely as a tool for suspense, but as a symbolic space to tell a story about the fragility of identity and the desperate need for belonging.

In an apparently idyllic community where pain is forbidden and serenity is treated like a religion, Matteo's journey unfolds: a queer teenager, both sacrificial body and redemptive figure.

The film is an exploration of coming of age as a profound transformation, but also of fatherhood as an ambiguous form of protection, control, and reflection. Father figures — biological, surrogate, spiritual — take turns attempting to fill an emotional void.

Far from the archetypes of conventional coming-of-age stories, this narrative portrays growth as both a loss of innocence and an act of resistance. It's a film about love as a healing force — but one that comes at a cost. About the vital role of pain in our lives. And about those brave enough not to smile.

Paolo Strippoli

IN CONVERSATION WITH PAOLO STRIPPOLI

What inspired you to write and direct this film? Where did you find your passion for telling this story and bringing it to the screen?

The idea for the film came from the two screenwriters Milo Tissone and Jacopo del Giudice, towards the end of our time together at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. We started writing it at the end of 2017, during a period of transition between the end of our studies and the void that adulthood brings; but it was also a way of looking around us and into ourselves. We wanted to reflect on everything we do as human beings to shake off pain: we are programmed in every way not to suffer and to feel good, and we are led to abuse the world around us and ourselves with all kinds of compensatory or coping mechanisms, from holistic practices to pharmaceuticals, from psychotropic drugs to religions. In *"The Holy Boy"*, I wanted to create a town, a community that was itself a character, where there are no good guys and bad guys, but only people who move from one side to the other, from protagonist to antagonist, depending on their need to shake off their suffering. The events of the film are set in a generic present—even though 2025 is mentioned—and they take place within a community that is timeless.

My intention was to make a coming-of-age film from two points of view: that of a man who wants to rediscover the possibility of being a father, Sergio (Michele Riondino), and that of a boy, Matteo Corbin (Giulio Feltri), who is looking for a point of reference while trying, like any teenager, to assert his identity. Their encounter is explosive, not only because the boy is not like other teenagers, but also because he embodies the compensatory mechanism of an entire community that has willfully forgotten how to suffer. I wanted to show what happens when a community unaccustomed to pain finds itself deprived of its indispensable coping mechanism. Matteo Corbin represents everything that psychotropic drugs, religions, or medications are for us in real life, and what we do, use, or abuse if all this disappears – because he is not just an object but a person, a human being.

In the film, there seems to be a very blurry line between good and evil.

I have never believed that there are good guys and bad guys in real life. I think that *"The Holy Boy"* clearly shows that the bad guys are also victims of their own acts. I wanted the film to play with the fine line between good and evil to constantly lead the viewer to try to understand who to root for, and who to watch out for and defend themselves from. I am a great lover of a certain type of cinema in which characters searching for their identity transcend the boundary between good and evil and, in the midst of their search for identity, shift from protagonists to antagonists. I am thinking in particular of films such as Joachim Trier's paranormal thriller *"Thelma"*, Brian De Palma's *'Carrie'* and the Stephen King book on which it is based, or Tomas Alfredson's *"Let the Right One In."* This is what happens to the two protagonists of our film: Matteo, who suddenly decides to free himself from the chains imposed on him by his community to find his identity and his true self, and Sergio, who embarks on a journey of growth and formation but also of de-formation of himself: he is a man who has been lost, deprived of the opportunity to be a father, and when he arrives in Remis, he recognizes in Matteo a figure who can somehow make him one again and—by answering his need—complete him.

So, in order to maintain and keep this relationship alive, he is prepared to destroy an entire community. The meeting of these two souls produces an explosion that threatens to overwhelm everyone. The two complement each other because they need each other:

Matteo needs to interact with someone who can help him find himself, in this case a surrogate father as a mentor, while Sergio is looking for a son who will make him feel like a father again, a role that life has cruelly taken away from him. So, in order to maintain and keep this relationship alive, he is prepared to destroy an entire community. The meeting of these two souls produces an explosion that threatens to overwhelm everyone. The two complement each other because they need each other: Matteo needs to interact with someone who can help him find himself, in this case a surrogate father and mentor, while Sergio is looking for a son who will make him feel like a father again, a role that life has cruelly taken away from him.

How does the character of Michela, played by Romana Maggiora Vergano, enter the scene?

As a child, Michela suffered a trauma that ended up rooting her violently and inescapably to the community in which she lives. She is young, with her future ahead of her, but she cannot leave Remis. Sergio represents a breath of new, fresh air in the village, and she decides to introduce the newcomer to the community's greatest secret. From my point of view, she does this mainly to keep Sergio close to her, for the glimpse of the outside world that he represents and which she has longed for a long time.

You mentioned a pseudo-ideal scenario in which a person protects themselves from pain by repressing it: in what sense?

Through the character of Pichler, played by Sergio Romano, the film describes how a fulfilled human being is someone who manages to live with their pain, and turn it into an opportunity for personal growth. Pain is inherent to our existence, but the entire community we depict is struggling with the impossibility of accepting it. If the inhabitants of Remis find themselves deprived of their coping mechanism, their personal way of repressing pain, they end up committing extreme and dangerous acts, both to themselves and others.

What kind of research went into writing the screenplay?

There are several quotes from sacred texts that are linked to the idea of the Antichrist as a figure who tempts people with the promise of immediate relief from pain. In this sense, Matteo could represent a sort of Antichrist - for those who want an answer about his nature at all costs. It must be said that there is an entire community trying to explain who he is, but any answer in the film is never clear and definitive. The important thing is not who Matteo is, but what we become as human beings when we are faced with such a figure: for Pichler, Matteo is a kind of Antichrist, but for the entire community, he is an angel and a savior... As for the documentation on these topics and to build a mythology, we consulted various texts, and in particular, one of the most important references explicitly cited in the film: chapter 13 of Revelation. The reference to Matteo Corbin's Antichrist can thus be interpreted in two ways depending on who approaches it. The film's game is to create a community with a character at its center and then, according to each person's perspective, to see in him either the Antichrist or, on the contrary, a Christ-like figure.

You choose not to give a precise indication, nor to reveal your point of view.

Yes, I think what's interesting is the ambiguity, the mystery. We do give answers, but we suggest different alternatives, and the viewer is led to believe one answer rather than another depending on the character they find themselves rooting for. We researched episodes of extra-canonical and miraculous phenomena, such as the "cult of the glorious Alberto," which in the 1940s featured a boy from Campania who, after being hit by a truck, was idolized by the local population and others, who believed that his spirit had been reincarnated in the body of a paternal aunt. I believe that our community of Remis, even if imaginary, represents a credible context for this story because the mountains isolate and

protect, and that is all the community of Remis needs. Italy is full of extraordinary phenomena, and I believe that what we have imagined for our story is plausible: filming in Friuli-Venezia Giulia among the mountains of Tarvisio and Sappada, one on the border with Slovenia, the other on the border with Veneto.

We wanted to create a world that wasn't a community with the extreme traits of films like *"The Wicker Man,"* which remains a major reference for me. We tried to build and design one that was closer to the reality of our Italy, without excessive elements of implausibility, without extreme symbols that often belong to the horror genre. After all, in our story, hugs are much more dangerous than chainsaws, even if we play with the codes of horror. I believe that *"The Holy Boy"* has a warm heart and can speak to a wider audience than just lovers of a certain codified genres. We wanted the audience to believe in the Remis Community as a place where they might find themselves in real life, a place they might learn about on TV or through a story heard on the street. Many people have asked me why I didn't exaggerate the smiles seen at the beginning of the story: in reality, the people of Remis appear serene and smiling, but we are not in *"Pleasantville,"* they are not the smiles of *"Smile,"* we are not in that kind of genre film. I wanted the context to be credible. Only by making it plausible could we powerfully convey the dissolution of the community we chose to portray.

How did you choose your actors?

I wanted a protagonist who was distant from the community, and I chose Michele Riordino for the role of Sergio not only because of his great talent and versatility, but also because I wanted to bring a little bit of Puglia to this mountain village... Michele is an actor who had never "lived" horror, at least not in this sense, and since I needed a "grounded" performer, attached to reality in body and intention, I chose him because he could truly represent an alien in that mountain community with ritualistic overtones: he is the perfect alien. As for the role of the young Matteo Corbin, I wanted a boy from northern Italy at all costs, but after a year of working together, casting director Anna Pennella found Giulio Feltri in Rome in a show at a youth workshop, and when I saw him, my heart skipped a beat. I wanted to avoid casting the usual Roman kids from films and TV series, and Giulio brought with him a maturity and humanity that was rare for a 15-year-old.

When I encountered this strong human material, I knew from the first moment that he was the Matteo I was looking for I made him go through five very long, four-hour auditions, consolidating my initial idea of wanting a non-actor—because there are kids who are very talented actors but too precise and polished—but Giulio was imprecise and authentic. Genre cinema is always precise and calculated, and the possibility of having a young non-actor who carried within him that tangible and valuable imprecision meant I didn't run the risk of falling into pure, "straight" genre cinema. It allowed me to be increasingly ambiguous and, I hope, more interesting. When I started writing the screenplay, I thought of Paolo Pierobon for the role of Matteo's father because he had the severity that the character required but also the gentleness and empathy in his eyes that I really needed. For the character of Michela, I had initially thought of a more mature actress, but then Romana Maggiora Vergano surprised us all with a splendid audition. She was a great discovery, and I realized that a younger actress than I had anticipated would convey the character's strong conflict with greater power.

What kind of relationship have you developed with your producers at Fandango?

The gestation period of this film was a very long one. We won the Solinas Award for best screenplay in 2019, and the project was followed over time by various production companies until the screenplay was purchased by Stefano Sardo and Ines Vasiljevic for their company Nightswim. However, this was a film that required a fairly large production structure, so Stefano and Ines joined forces with Domenico Procacci's Fandango. One

evening at 11 p.m., Domenico wrote to me to say that he liked the film and wanted to meet me as soon as possible, which made me particularly happy because of the infinite esteem I have always had for him. We began to 'assemble' the film through a process that lasted almost two years: we began the actual preparation in the spring of 2024, but three weeks before the start of filming, the distribution company we had found backed out and we found ourselves without a part of the budget we were counting on. Everything came to a standstill and, with great discomfort, I was resigning myself to giving up after seven years, to telling everyone that perhaps this film could not be made. But Procacci, who is an enlightened producer, did not give up. A month later, he called me to tell me that Vision (Distribution) would be joining the team, having embraced our project 100% with an enthusiasm that made me really happy: I say this to highlight the difference that real producers make and how I will never be grateful enough to Procacci, Laura Paolucci, and the other managers at Fandango for being even more insistent than me in wanting to make this film with great courage, even in the face of great difficulty.

PAOLO STRIPPOLI | Writer-Director

Paolo Strippoli was born in Corato, Bari, Italy in 1993. He graduated in Film Directing from the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome after obtaining a degree in Performing Arts and Sciences from La Sapienza University. In 2019, he won the Franco Solinas Award for Best Screenplay with the film *L'angelo infelice*, written with Jacopo del Giudice and Milo Tissone. In 2020, he directed the Netflix original film *A Classic Horror Story* with Roberto De Feo, winning Best Director at the 67th Taormina Film Fest. In 2022 his second feature film, the psychological horror *Piove*, is released, competing at the Sitges Film Festival, Austin Fantastic Fest, and Alice Nella Città. His third film, *The Holy Boy (La valle dei sorrisi)*, will be released in cinemas in 2025.

MICHELE RIONDINO

ACTOR

2024	THE HOLY BOY (LA VALLE DEI SORRISI) by Paolo Strippoli
2024	PRIMAVERA by Damiano Michieletto
2023	PALAZZINA LAF by Michele Riondino
2022	INTERSTATE by Jean-Luc Herbulot
2021	THE MAN FROM ROME by Jaap van Heusden
2021	I NOSTRI FANTASMI by Alessandro Capitani
2019	UN'AVVENTURA by Marco Danieli
2017	RESTIAMO AMICI by Antonello Grimaldi
2017	DIVA! by Francesco Patierno
2016	FALCHI by Toni D'Angelo
2015	LA RAGAZZA DEL MONDO by Marco Danieli
2014	MERAVGLIOSO BOCCACCIO by Paolo & Vittorio Taviani
2014	SENZA LASCIARE TRACCIA by Gianclaudio Cappai
2013	IL GIOVANE FAVOLOSO by Mario Martone
2012	BELLA ADDORMETATA by Marco Bellocchio
2012	ACCIAIO by Stefano Mordini
2011	GLI SFIORATI by Matteo Rovere
2011	QUALCHE NUVOLA by Saverio Di Biagio
2010	NOI CREDEVAMO by Mario Martone
2010	HENRY by Alessandro Piva
2008	FORTAPASC by Marco Risi
2008	DIECI INVERNI by Valerio Mieli
2008	MARE PICCOLO by Alessandro Di Robilant

2007 IL PASSATO E' UNA TERRA STRANIERA by Daniele Vicari
2002 UOMINI & DONNE VERITA' & BUGIE by Eleonora Giorgi

MICHELE RIONDINO

DIRECTOR, SCREENWRITER AND ACTOR

2023 PALAZZINA LAF by Michele Riondino

PAOLO PIEROBON

2025 MUORI DI LEI by Stefano Sardo
2024 THE HOLY BOY (LA VALLE DEI SORRISI) by Paolo Strippoli
2024 EUROPA CENTRALE by Gianluca Minucci
2024 LA GRANDE AMBIZIONE by Andrea Segre
2023 PALAZZINA LAF by Michele Riondino
2024 LA VITA ACCANTO by Marco Tullio Giordana
2023 RAPITO by Marco Bellocchio
2023 LA CACCIA by Marco Bocci
2022 IPERSONNIA by Alberto Mascia
2022 I NOSTRI FANTASMI by Alessandro Capitani
2021 WELCOME VENICE by Andrea Segre
2021 QUI RIDO IO by Mario Martone
2021 LA TERRA DEI FIGLI by Claudio Cupellini
2018 BEATE by Samad Zarmandili
2017 L'ORDINE DELLE COSE by Andrea Segre
2016 LA PELLE DELL'ORSO by Marco Segato
2016 QUO VADO? by Gennaro Nunziante
2013 IL CAPITALE UMANO by Paolo Virzi
2013 ASPIRANTE VEDOVO by Massimo Venier
2013 LA PRIMA NEVE by Andrea Segre
2011 IL MIO DOMANI by Marina Spada
2010 NOI CREDEVAMO by Mario Martone
2010 COSA VOGLIO DI PIÙ by Silvio Soldini
2010 HAPPY FAMILY by Gabriele Salvatores
2009 VINCERE by Marco Bellocchio
2007 MI FIDO DI TE by Massimo Venier
2006 L'ARIA SALATA by Alessandro Angelini
2006 COME L'OMBRA by Marina Spada
2005 L'UOMO PERFETTO by Luca Lucini
2003 FAME CHIMICA by Paolo Vari e Antonio Bocola
2002 GIOVANI by Marco Mazzieri
2002 FATMIR by Ermir Keta
2001 LUCE DEI MIEI OCCHI by Giuseppe Piccioni
2001 FORZA CANI by Marina Spada
2001 LA PRECISIONE DEL CASO by Cesare Cicardini

ROMANA MAGGIORA VERGANO

2024	THE HOLY BOY (LA VALLE DEI SORRISI) by Paolo Strippoli
2024	PORTOBELLO by Marco Bellocchio (serie)
2023	IL TEMPO CHE CI VUOLE by Francesca Comencini
2022	C'È ANCORA DOMANI by Paola Cortellesi
2022	COME LE TARTARUGHE by Monica Dugo
2022	LA STORIA by Francesca Archibugi (serie)
2021	CABRINI by Alejandro Gomez Monteverde
2021	ANNI DA CANE by Fabio Mollo
2021	CHRISTIAN by Stefano Lodovichi (serie)
2021	SICCITÀ by Paolo Virzì
2020	GLI ANNI BELLI by Lorenzo D'Amico de Carvalho

ROBERTO CITRAN

2024	THE HOLY BOY (LA VALLE DEI SORRISI) by Paolo Strippoli
2024	L'AMORE STA BENE SU TUTTO by Giampaolo Morelli
2023	LA GRANDE AMBIZIONE by Andrea Segre
2023	FANUM by Iris Gaeta
2023	CONCLAVE by Edward Berger
2022	NON RIATTACCARE by Manfredi Lucibello
2022	IL PIÙ BEL GIORNO DELLA NOSTRA VITA by Massimo Venier
2022	BILLY by Emilia Mazzacurati
2021	IL GIARDINIERE by Marco Santarelli
2021	TRAFFICANTE DI VIRUS by Costanza Quatriglio
2021	DUE by Giuseppe Battiston
2020	WELCOME VENICE by Andrea Segre
2019	DIABOLIK by Marco e Antonio Manetti
2019	IL GRANDE PASSO by Antonio Padovan
2019	1991 by Ricardo Trogi
2018	LETTO N.6 by Milena Coccozza
2017	L'ORDINE DELLE COSE by Andrea Segre
2016	FINCHÉ C'È PROSECCO C'È SPERANZA by Antonio Padovan
2016	UNA NOBILE CAUSA by Emilio Briguglio
2015	LA MACCHINAZIONE by David Grieco
2013	ZORAN IL MIO NIPOTE SCEMO by Matteo Oleotto
2013	ASPIRANTE VEDOVO by Massimo Venier
2011	IO SONO LÌ by Andrea Segre
2011	C'È CHI DICE NO by Giambattista Avellino
2009	SCONTRO DI CIVILTÀ PER UN ASCENSORE IN PIAZZA VITTORIO by Isotta Toso
2007	NOTTURNO BUS by Davide Marengo
2007	LEZIONI DI VOLO by Francesca Archibugi
2006	4 4 2 (1° episodio) by Michele Carrillo
2004	LA VITA CHE VORREI by Giuseppe Piccioni
2004	HOTEL RWANDA by Terry George
2003	LE VALIGIE DI TULSE LUPER (2° e 3° episodio) by Peter Greenaway
2002	IL FUGGIASCO by Andrea Manni
2001	A CAVALLO DELLA TIGRE by Carlo Mazzacurati
2000	CAPTAIN CORELLI'S MANDOLIN by John Madden
1999	TOBIA AL CAFFÈ by Gianfranco Mingozzi
1999	NORA by Patricia Murphy
1998	THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY by Anthony Minghella

ROBERTO CITRAN (Contd.)

1996	LA TREGUA by Francesco Rosi
1996	LA TERZA LUNA by Matteo Bellinelli
1996	LA CLASSE NON È ACQUA by Cecilia Calvi
1995	IL CIELO È SEMPRE PIÙ BLU by Antonello Grimaldi
1995	MARCIANDO NEL BUIO by Massimo Spano
1995	ITALIANI by Maurizio Ponzi
1995	CERVELLINI FRITTI by Maurizio Zaccaro
1995	CARAMELLE by Cinzia Th Torrini
1994	IL TORO by Carlo Mazzacurati
1993	AGOSTO by Massimo Spano
1992	QUATTRO FIGLI UNICI by Fulvio Wetzl
1991	CHIEDI LA LUNA by Giuseppe Piccioni
1991	AMBROGIO by Wilma Labate
1990	I DIVERTIMENTI DELLA VITA PRIVATA by Cristina Comencini
1990	CONDOMINIO by Felice Farina
1989	PICCOLI EQUIVOCI by Ricky Tognazzi
1989	CORSA DI PRIMAVERA by Giacomo Campiotti
1989	IO PETER PAN by Enzo De Caro
1989	IL PRETE BELLO by Carlo Mazzacurati
1987	NOTTE ITALIANA by Carlo Mazzacurati
1986	PAROLE E BACI by Simona e Rossella Izzo