NATHAN STEWART-JARRETT

GEORGE MACKAY

Berlinale

73 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin

Panorama

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
SAM H. FREEMAN AND NG CHOON PING

ANTON AND BBC FILM PRESENT AN AGILE FILMS PRODUCTION "FEMME" NATHAN STEWART-JARRETT GEORGE MACKAY WITH AARON HEFFERNAN JOHN MCCREA ASHA REID CASTING BY JULIE HARKIN NATHAN TOTH MUSIC BY ADAM JANOTA BZOWSKI COSTUME DESIGNER BUKI EBIESUWA HAIR AND MAKEUP DESIGNER MARIE DEEHAN PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHRISTOPHER MELGRAM EDITOR SELINA MACARTHUR DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES RHODES ASSOCIATE PRODUCER MARNIE PODOS EVA YATES SEBASTIEN RAYBAUD KATE MAXWELL HARRIET HARPER-JONES DAVID STANILAND CO-PRODUCER HAYLEY WILLIAMS DIMITRIS BIRBILIS PRODUCED BY MYLES PAYNE SAM RITZENBERG SCREENPLAY BY SAM H. FREEMAN AND NG CHOON PING DIRECTED BY SAM H. FREEMAN AND NG CHOON PING BBC FILM Agilefilms

SEDUCTION IS REVENGE

FEMME



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FEMME
(noun)

Femme is a term that refers to an LGBTQ+ person whose gender expression is considered to be feminine. It was originally used to distinguish feminine lesbian and bisexual women from butch women, and it is still one of the main uses of the term. A common definition of Femme is someone who queers or subverts femininity.

LOGLINE

Jules' life and career as a drag queen is destroyed by a homophobic attack, but when he re-encounters his attacker in a gay sauna, he is presented with a chance to exact revenge.

SYNOPSIS

Jules' life and career as a drag queen is destroyed by a homophobic attack. But when he re-encounters his attacker, the deeply-closeted Preston, in a gay sauna, he is presented with a chance to exact revenge. Unrecognisable out of his wig and make-up, Jules infiltrates Preston's life, and in doing so, discovers power in a different kind of drag...



DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

The seed of Femme came from our desire to flip the classic hyper-masculinity of the Neo-noir thriller on its head. By putting a queer protagonist at the heart of our revenge story, we aimed to put our own stamp on a genre that we love but from which we have often felt excluded.

However once we started work on the film, the idea began to evolve into something that felt much bigger in scope. We realised that a queer reframing of such a hetero-centric genre was the perfect way to explore - and explode - conventional ideas of sexuality, masculinity, patriarchy, and identity. Our conversations around these topics brought up a lot for us as gay men about things that terrify us and things that make us rage.

As we dug deeper, we came to the conclusion that the film we wanted to make was, at its core, about drag. And not only the more recognisable feminine drag that Jules dons at the beginning of the story. Almost every character in the film wears a form of drag: a performance of gender that earns them power and status in the world they inhabit. Femme delves into what happens when those masks are challenged.

We hope that in adopting and subverting familiar devices from many films that we love, we have created a space for Femme that is all its own. In a way the film itself is wearing a form of drag. It's a dark story, and we decided early on that we weren't interested in making a moralistic film, where the good guys take the high road and the bad guys always get their comeuppance. Our interest lies in exploring the reality of the characters and how the world they live in propels them into doing the things that they do. Making Femme was both exhilarating and cathartic for us, and we hope to bring you along on that same journey.



INTERVIEW WITH - SAM H. FREEMAN & NG CHOON PING

Can you tell us about the origins of the story? Was it based on something you have personally experienced?

We began with the idea of how queer people often feel uneasy in aggressively "straight" spaces - a feeling of being emotionally, sometimes even physically, endangered. We wanted to make the most exciting and visceral version of that story. We're also both massive fans of the thriller genre, where the hero risks great harm to achieve fulfilment - to right a wrong, or just simply to survive. It felt natural then to tell a deeply personal story through a genre that we loved. Neither of us has experienced the precise plot of the film (fortunately!) but the extreme events of a thriller were the fullest artistic expression of the painful, sometimes dark, emotions of our lives.

The character of Jules (played by Nathan Stewart-Jarrett) experiences a downfall from the height of power and joy, and embarks upon a journey to regain that power. He's fueled by a need to restore justice. That is something that anyone, queer or otherwise, can empathise with. That he takes the unhealthy path, is also deeply human.

That Jules is a drag queen began as a plot necessity - so that Preston (George MacKay) - doesn't recognise him out of drag) but it quickly became the central theme of the film. We're both also avid watchers of Rupaul's Drag Race - Rupaul's famous catchphrase is "We're all born naked and the rest is drag". In our film, drag starts as a plot device for going undercover to pursue revenge, but becomes an exploration of how we're all in different kinds of drag to feel powerful, to fit in, to hide truths that are too painful for the light of day. Jules begins with feminine drag - the kind of genderfucking that gives him power in queer world. Preston puts on masculine drag, the kind of status-quo-reinforcement that gives him power in his homophobic milieu.

What was the process to decide to make FEMME into a streamlined thriller?

First and foremost we wanted to make a thriller out of personal stories; we're (incidentally) queer and therefore some of our stories have queer protagonists who go through lives that are inevitably shaped by that identity. However, we do see that the thriller genre is almost exclusively heteronormative; the genre is a space where we have not really seen

much evidence of queer agency. We suppose this is our way of counter-colonising the mainstream. Queer cinema is often about quiet drama; queer stories are so often about coming out, or victimhood, or socialising our way into acceptance. We wanted to tell other stories, of queer protagonists who exact revenge, do dangerous, reckless things, run through burning buildings, battle alien overlords to save the multiverse, and be rewarded at the end with a same-sex/gender-fluid kiss for it.

The feature film we had initially pitched was quite different from what we eventually made. In making the short film (which we did as a proof-of-concept) we were struck by the chemistry between the characters and realised there was a much more interesting story in having a duo of protagonists whose individual struggles with their identities collide and intersect in a thrilling, dangerous way. In the feature, to develop the relationship between the two main characters at the centre of the story, we realised that it needed to happen over a longer time period than the one night of the short, and for Jules to be a much more active character, making multiple decisions that bring him deeper and deeper into danger.

The film elegantly shifts in genres, what type of films could you say influenced you in the making of FEMME?

Femme could be seen as an unlikely, uncomfortable love story that emerges from the revenge thriller. Because the revenge is essentially Jules's weaponisation of sex to seduce Preston into a place of emotional vulnerability, each "romantic" beat is also inseparably a revenge beat - a complete melding of the two genres.

We also think of it as an erotic thriller: where sex is dangerous and, more excitingly, danger is sexy. Jules is turned on by the dangerous actions he's undertaking - he feels empowered by his recklessness, which restores his ability to feel sexy again. We have a whole range of erotic thrillers, especially those from the 90s, as references for danger as sexy.

The film has also been called "queer noir", which we love - It's a flip of the genre, where we follow the journey of the femme fatale instead, insinuating their way into the life and heart of the "hero" in order to destroy him.

The beauty of the film is how it illustrates that Jules and Preston use masculinity as something purely performative.

Jules and Preston are essentially the same in how they perform for power. Preston performs hypermasculinity - the mannerisms, the gym body, the tattoos - to survive the strict heternormative hierarchy he was born into. Jules performs - and perfects the performance of masculinity, becoming a drag king - to survive Preston's world.

Drag is about the performance of gender and power. Jules's feminine drag in the queer world is about celebrating the fluidity of gender - it is meant to be a joy and a freedom. However, after his trauma, his feminine drag identity becomes a burden - something that he feels he has somehow betrayed by being attacked while wearing it. His performance of a submissive, feminine gay man for Preston's private enjoyment is just that, a performance, as Jules is the one with the upper hand. Preston's masculine drag gives him freedom in his "straight" world, but prevents him from having real relationships. Only by slowly letting go of his performance of dominance is he able to start to experience pleasure and joy. We experience drag on multiple levels in the film - both as a form of empowerment and as a form of restraint.

The film tackles the issues of toxic masculinity and internalised Homophobia. Do you feel there is a palpable shift in society in how we see this crisis of masculine identity? Why do you think feminine men / trans women pose such a threat to masculine identity?

Because difference is scary? Because if the status quo has treated you well, anything that threatens the status quo threatens you? Fluidity of gender and sexuality threatens certain kinds of masculine identity, the kind that needs clear boundaries and hierarchies to preserve its privilege and power.

In a way, our film is a doomed love story. Because of how the world is currently structured, the events of the film propel the two characters towards each other, Jules in pursuit of justice and Preston, of connection. Jules thinks justice will finally heal him, but plants the seed for disaster; Preston thinks he can finally escape his life of secrecy, but his violent past catches up with him. What we hope for the film is that it shows both empathy for the hurt that drove the revenge, and also empathy for the self-hatred that drove the homophobia.

The film uses its locations very efficiently, Where was it shot?

The film was shot in locations around East London. We wanted to present a vibrant, richly textured London, and do for the city what so many American films have done for New York. We also wanted to focus on night-time London (a scheduling challenge as we shot during the summer with short nights!) with storms of colour that shift between joyous and hectic. We had a very tight budget, and averaged about 20 shots each day. This was only made possible by the amazing team we had: Dimitris was a Production Manager wizard; James, who was also DOP for our short film, gave us kinetic, emotionally precise shots; Jeroen our 1st AD was both a creative and logistical collaborator who somehow got us all the shots we needed; and most of all, Nathan and George our two leads who gave us amazing performances with every take.

The music is very dynamic and underpins the tension. Can you tell us a little about the choice of composer and music styles?

We were really impressed by Adam's atmospheric and emotive score for Saint Maud. We had very specific desires for the score, and we knew it would be a tall order to balance all of the elements. It had to feel uniquely tailored to our film - a twisted, erotic, propulsive psychological thriller set in contemporary East London. And because Jules is (by design) a loner and does not confide his innermost thoughts to anyone else in the film, we also needed it to function as a kind of inner monologue, to allow the audience to experience the film primarily through Jules's subjectivity - his fear, his hatred, his dark thoughts, his growing sense of recklessness and power, and his dilemmas.



SAM H. FREEMAN & NG CHOON PING (FILMMAKERS)

Sam and Ping co-wrote and co-directed the BIFA-winning, BAFTA nominated short FEMME starring Paapa Essiedu and Harris Dickinson, which premiered in competition at SXSW.

Sam has worked extensively in television, most recently writing the pilot for his own original series with Bad Wolf and HBO Max. Other television work includes INDUSTRY (HBO/Bad Wolf), THIS IS GOING TO HURT (BBC/Sister Pictures) and THE POWER (Amazon/Sister Pictures). His first original series Unmasked sold to Disney.

Ping recently directed a new adaptation of Strindberg's "Miss Julie" at the Hong Kong Arts Festival as well as "Macbeth" at the Bristol Old Vic. He has directed over the last decade at the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company and Young Vic, and is the recipient of multiple prestigious awards in recognition of his theatre work.

FEMME is their debut feature.

NATHAN STEWART-JARRETT (JULES)

Nathan Stewart-Jarrett recently starred in Jordan Peele produced hit horror film Candyman. He is best known to television audiences for playing Curtis in E4's Misfits, about a group of teens that gained superpowers. Stewart-Jarrett's other television credits include: the BBC/Netflix mini-series Dracula,Channel 4's cult hit Utopia, Hulu series Four Weddings And A Funeral, and the BBC's The Trial of Christine Keeler. He also recently starred in the television series Soulmates opposite Bill Skarsgard; and in the HBO series Generation. Brought up in London, Nathan studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama. He made his professional stage debut in 'Brixton Stories' at the Lyric, Hammersmith and has also appeared on stage in 'The History Boys' for the National Theatre West End and in Tarell Alvin McCraney's Wig Out at the Royal Court Theatre. His recent theatre credits include the National Theatre's Broadway revival of Angels in America opposite Nathan Lane and Andrew Garfield. He will next be seen starring in Sam H. Freeman & Ng Choon Ping's debut film Femme and Disney+'s upcoming series Culprits with Gemma Arterton and Eddie Izzard.



GEORGE MACKAY (PRESTON)

British actor George MacKay is considered one of the UK's most exciting and prolific talents, crafting a career across film, television, and theatre. George received nominations for 'Most Promising British Newcomer' at the British Independent Film Awards, and 'Young British Performer of The Year' and British/Irish Actor of the Year at the London Critics Circle Awards for his work in The Boys Are Back and 1917 respectively. For 1917 George also won the Virtuoso award at the Santa Barbara Film Festival and Best Breakthrough Performance from the Online Film and Television Association. George was nominated as a BAFTA Rising Star and was awarded the 'Best Film Actor' Scottish BAFTA Award for his work in For Those In Peril. In addition, he was selected as one of the ten best European actors at the Berlinale Shooting Stars and received the prestigious Chopard Trophy at the Cannes Film Festival...

GEORGE MACKAY (PRESTON)

George recently finished production on Femme the debut feature of Sam H. Freeman & Ng Choon Ping which will debut at the year's Berlinale and the new Netflix thriller I Came By starring opposite Kelly MacDonald and Hugh Bonneville. George's recent features include Munich: Edge of War opposite Jeremy Irons and Jessica Brown Findlay, and Wolf opposite Lily-Rose Depp and Paddy Considine. George previously played the lead role in Sam Mendes's award-winning film 1917 co-written by Krysty Wilson-Cairns, starring opposite Dean-Charles Chapman, Colin Firth, Mark Strong, and Benedict Cumberbatch, The film was nominated and won numerous awards including Best Motion Picture Drama at the 2020 Golden Globes and BAFTA Awards. That same year he was also seen in The True History Of The Kelly Gang starring alongside Russell Crowe, Charlie Hunnam, Nicholas Hoult, and Essie Davis. Recent additional features include A Guide To Second Date Sex, and Ophelia. George's previous credits include: the movie-musical Been So Long, Where Hands Touch, The Secret of Marrowbone, the Cannes Film Festival winner Captain Fantastic, Bypass, Pride, Sunshine On Leith, How I Live Now, Breakfast With Jonny Wilkinson, For Those In Peril, Defiance, Foreign Parts, Private Peaceful, Hunky Dory, and The Thief Lord.

On the small screen, George was seen in the original Hulu miniseries 11.22.63. as lead in an episode of Neil Gaiman's Likely Stories and in the BBC drama The Trick, BBC One's The Outcast. His other credits include Best of Men, The Old Curiosity Shop, Johnny and The Bomb, and BBC's BAFTA and Emmy-nominated Tsunami: The Aftermath. George made his theatre debut in early 2014 in Ian McEwan's The Cement Garden directed by David Aula, a revival of Eugene O'Neil's play Ah Wilderness at The Young Vic, and at The Old Vic in Matthew Warchus' production of The Caretaker.

MARNIE PODOS (Executive Producer)

After 8 years at London-based United Agents, curating a list of emergent writers and filmmakers, Marnie left in 2018 to form boutique firm Under New Mmgt. Respected on both sides of the pond for nurturing talent and developing their projects with them—from creative inception to finance to execution—she recently converted that hands-on approach to producing select projects alongside the management of her roster. In the building and shaping of FEMME, a natural partnership arose with Agile Films. A graduate of Princeton, she moved from the US to the UK in 2003 to complete her MSt and DPhil in English Literature at Oxford before taking her first job in the industry at Working Title Films.

SAM RITZENBERG (Producer)

Sam is a BIFA-winning and BAFTA-nominated producer who has worked across films that have played at major film festivals around the world. Hailing from California, Sam took over the head of film and tv position at Agile in 2019.

MYLES PAYNE (Producer)

Founder of Agile Films, Myles has executive produced and produced a wide range of projects across narrative and documentary. Amongst many others, this includes the BAFTA-winning Beast, Next Goal Wins, and Worlds on Fire

CAST

Nathan Stewart-Jarrett	Jules
George MacKay	Preston
Aaron Heffernan	Oz
John McCrea	Toby
Asha Reid	Alicia

CREW

Co-Producers	Hayley Williams & Dimitris Birbilis
Director of Photography	James Rhodes
Editor	Selina Macarthur
Production Designer	Christopher Melgram
Costume Designer	Buki Ebiesuwa
Music	Adam Janota Bzowski
Casting	Julie Harkin & Nathan Toth

Anton and **BBC Film** Presents an **Agile Films** Production

‘FEMME’

Nathan Stewart-Jarrett **George MacKay**

with **Aaron Heffernan** **John McCrea** **Asha Reid**

Casting **Julie Harkin** **Nathan Toth** Music **Adam Janota Bzowski**

Costume Designer **Buki Ebiesuwa** Editor **Selina Macarthur**

Production Designer **Christopher Melgram** Director of Photography **James Rhodes** Executive Producers **Sebastien Raybaud** **Kate Maxwell Eva Yates** **David Staniland** **Harriet Harper-Jones** **Marnie Podos** Co-Producers **Hayley Williams Dimitris Birbilis**

Producers **Myles Payne Sam Ritzenberg** Screenplay **Sam H. Freeman** and **Ng Choon Ping**

Directed By **Sam H. Freeman** and **Ng Choon Ping**

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