



# the hour of living

an optimist film by sebastian michael



## fact sheet

### The Hour of Living

HD, United Kingdom/Switzerland, 2012

Running time: 1h 52' (112 minutes)

Colour / Black & White

English Dialogue

Written, produced and directed by

**Sebastian Michael**

Codirector: **Adam Berzsenyi Bellaagh**

Director of Photography: **Gregor Brändli**

Coproducer: **Pascal Verdosci**

Original Soundtrack: **Pepe Belmonte**

Sound Recordist: **Geoff Widdowson**

Re-recording Mixer: **Hartmut Homolka**

#### *Cast:*

**Sam Fordham** - Theo

**Charlotte Heinimann** - Gabrielle

**David Wade** - Conrad

**Gary Grant** - Harry

**Christoph Schwegler** - Werner

**Dan Absalom** - Ivor

**Andrea Spolarics** - Eva

**Sebastian Michael** - George

**Pepe Belmonte** - The Singer

Edited by **Sebastian Michael**

Edit Consultant - **Claudio Cea**

Screen Ratio: Native 1.78 (16:9) /

Projection 1.85

Frame Rate: 25 fps

Original Shooting Format: HD

Camera: Canon EOS 5 Mk II DSLR

Sound: Stereo

#### *Shot on location in:*

Safiental (Graubünden), Zürich and

Basel, Switzerland

Polperro (Cornwall) and London,

Great Britain

Budapest, Hungary

#### *Interesting Facts:*

- First feature film to be funded entirely on a frame-by-frame basis by individual framefunders
- Director's first feature

#### *Logline:*

Theo goes looking for the love of his dad and finds a man who's put his life on hold for him.

*"everybody should know their father.  
after all, he's half your genetic make-up."*





## synopsis

*"up here, time doesn't really pass so much  
as amble..."*

Theo is on a quest.

When his mother succumbs to a long illness and dies, he finds among her belongings a bit of film that has his father in it, as a young man. It's from around the time soon after Theo was born and his father looks happy. Really happy and a little in love. Maybe a lot. With the person behind the camera, it's totally obvious. Only, in the film is also his mother. So whoever is behind that camera is not his mother.

Theo is more than a little intrigued. He lost his dad when he was only about ten, in what may or may not have been an accident, and so he never really got to know him. Now he wants to get to know him. So he sets out to find the person behind the camera.

His search leads him from his mother's boyfriend to his mother's boyfriend's ex wife to his mother's boyfriend's ex wife's former lover back to his mother's boyfriend's ex wife's friend to the man who should know who was behind that camera: George Walter.

George lives high up in the mountains, as remote as he could get. He was a bit famous once, around ten years ago, but

since then he's been living as a recluse, he doesn't have a mobile, he doesn't do Facebook, he isn't online.

When Theo meets George something happens. Because George was the man behind the camera. And he was in love with Theo's dad, very much. And he also, though he probably isn't, feels responsible for Theo's dad's death. So what he sees in Theo is more than just his first, maybe his only love's son. And what Theo sees in George is more than a route to his dad.

As the two men spend time together on the mountain, they of course get to know each other. More than that though, they get to know themselves.



## director

Sebastian Michael has written and directed two short films: *Twenty-Six Takes on Life Without Allen*, which was screened at festivals in Chicago, Los Angeles, London, Lisbon and Padua, and *The Study of Bunkers & Mounds in a Temperate Climate (Relatively Speaking)*, which was 'highly commended' in the TCM Classic Shorts Competition 2006 and premiered in the official *Pardi di Domani* selection of the International Film Festival Locarno 2007. He also produced the award-winning *Daisy's Last Stand*, directed by Gary Grant. *The Hour of Living* is Sebastian's first feature film.

Sebastian was born in Manchester, UK, into a Swiss family and grew up in Basel, Switzerland, where he went to school and where he staged his first two plays, *Sentimental Breakdown...* and *Dialog*, in both of which he also appeared.

Aged 21, Sebastian moved to London where he took a degree in Social Sciences while working in a front-line drugs agency in Soho. He then trained as an actor and brought his first four English plays to the Edinburgh and London fringe: *Sisters* (which he also directed), *QED*, *All The World* (in which he also acted, directed by Mehmet Ergen), and *Exit*.

Sebastian then continued to work as an actor, before taking time out to concentrate on his writing. His plays *The Power of Love*, *Love Hurts* and *Time After Time* each reached the final stages of Soho Theatre's Verity Bargate Award in separate years and together now form the *Love Trilogy*. His play *Top Story* was presented as a rehearsed reading at the ICA London in May 2008 as part of the Accidental Festival, and *Elder Latimer is in Love* was staged to critical acclaim at Arcola Theatre in the autumn of 2009, directed by Adam Berzsenyi Bellaagh. His latest play *Baur Au Lac* received a rehearsed reading, starring Susannah York, in March 2010 and is now in development towards a full production in 2012.

Sebastian's next feature film is slated to be *Soho, Night 9X9*, an 'Altmanesque homage to Soho and the people who live, work and play there, at night'.

"silence too is an addiction. silence and thoughts  
adrift: the endless lure of inaction."





## cast

*The Hour of Living* brings together a cast of established players and newcomers:

Making his debut in a feature film as Theo is **Sam Fordham** who graduated from drama school in 2009. Sam is also the drummer in the young Indie band *Daytona Lights* who in October 2011 appeared as themselves in the British drama series *Hollyoaks*, in a story line that ran for several weeks.

Also new to features are **David Wade**, playing Theo's best friend Conrad and **Dan Absalom**, as Conrad's brother Ivor. **Gary Grant**, on the other hand was not only a regular on British TV's long-running series *The Bill* (as DC Paul Riley) for two years, but has since appeared in eleven films, including several features, and he's also directed a short and a feature himself.

In Switzerland, **Charlotte Heinemann** is a familiar face to TV viewers from various appearances, but particularly as Hedwig, the life partner of commissioner Hunkeler, in adaptations of the popular books by one of Switzerland's best-loved writers, Hansjörg Schneider.

**Christoph Schwegler** is a household name in German-speaking Switzerland, but while almost everybody knows his voice, not that many people have necessarily seen him: Christoph presented the very first official chart show on Swiss radio, and has been one of its most eminent presenters ever since. He can be heard every week on

Swiss Radio One with his own show, *Country Special*.

**Andrea Spolarics** is one of Budapest's most acclaimed stage actresses, with several film credits to her name. She's now making her English-language feature debut in *The Hour of Living*.

**Pepe Belmonte** joins the cast not as an actor but in the capacity of The Singer, playing, among one or two others, almost every song from his first album *The Hermit's Waltz*, which is being released to coincide with the film.

For **Sebastian Michael**, having acted on stage and in various shorts, though never his own, this is his first feature both as a director and actor.

"you have to try things in life,  
what else are you living for?"





## director's statement

*"All you need to make a film is a girl and a gun."* - Jean-Luc Godard

To me, and speaking as an ardent admirer of Godard, who happens to be a fellow Swiss, fellow expat and someone who also came to making films by an unorthodox route, that kind of statement comes as a gauntlet: my first feature, I decided, would have neither a girl in it nor a gun, and not a hint of a chase you could cut to.

*The Hour of Living* is a subtle, you could say 'gentle', comedy-drama, which, in the shorthand that likes to pitch 'this' film as meeting 'that', to my mind evokes *Lost in Translation* at the eastern and *Brokeback Mountain* at the western end of the equation.

I am, and have always been, interested primarily in people and what goes on in the borderline areas between them where they almost meet, but not quite, where things could work out, but often don't, where we start to articulate things, and fail. While clearly I do write dialogue - my characters are not silent types - it is in fact often what goes on between the lines that fascinates me, what lies behind the eyes, in the part of the brain that the mundane can't reach.

I come to film as a writer first, actor second and video artist third. That's just the way it happened and the route I've taken, not so much by design as by default: I've always written (I wrote my first play at the age of

17), but it was only a few years ago that I felt, with digital technology lowering the drawbridge, that I could venture into what I had previously regarded as an enchanted but impenetrable fortress: film.

With this, my first feature, I set out to make a film *entirely as I saw it*. I realise this is not necessarily a wise approach. Audiences tend to understand certain conventions and may become frustrated when there isn't a strong plot to follow. But I'm not really a story-teller in the first instance. I'm an observer and portrayer of characters. And I love them, my characters, I always find something about them that intrigues me, most particularly the things that they try hard to, but can't very well express.

The premise at the heart of this film is one that had been sloshing around my brain for a while: what happens when you are confronted with *not* the person whom you've most been in love with (maybe *the only* person you've ever really been in love with) but *their offspring*. In George's case that's Theo, the now adult son of Jamie. But it could just as well be somebody's daughter.

So although this is a dynamic between two men, that's only really one aspect, and not even the most important one. I don't see this primarily as a 'gay' story. In fact, the characters' sexuality is not, in that sense, an issue. At the core of George's and Jamie's relationship lay a profound affection for, and comfort with, each other. So when Theo, on his quest to find the love of his dad - and

*"it isn't just about happiness. everybody is unhappy sometimes. but sometimes people get lost."*





through the love of his dad, his dad - arrives on the mountain, these two don't start from scratch. At face value they are complete strangers to each other, but of course they are linked, even tied, to each other by a very present absent third: Jamie. It's this I want to get at, this undefined relationship that has in it love and the absence of love (both Theo and George miss one of the greatest parts of their lives), trust and the breach of that trust (George's ultimate rejection, in spite of himself, of Jamie, and Jamie's rejection, by taking his own life, of Theo), closeness and the devastating chasm of never getting close after all.

Add to this the fact that theirs is really an emotional no-go zone: you don't fancy the son of your friend, whether he was a lover or not. And if you're the son, and you get this involved with the man who was in love with your dad, never even mind what your own feelings are about men and women, then do you become in effect a surrogate for your father? An 'Oedipus-in-semi-reverse'? Or just a young man searching some affirmation of who he is?

My ambition with this film is to enter into this world of wholly diffuse boundaries, and explore them, gently. I don't have a point to make as such. But I love quirkiness in human beings and so I love it in films. There are some big, heavy subjects stacked up around these characters, but they nevertheless make you smile, sometimes laugh. So the style of this film is also quirky, it's 'odd', because we are.

So I'm not really setting out to prove anything, to Jean-Luc Godard or anyone else: I'm really just making a film about a young man who goes looking for someone who knew his father. And in the process he propels that someone right back into his own life: the eternal give and take of our existence...

*"out here, you realise that everything  
is in motion. always."*



stories...

*"you don't have the memory of an elephant at all.  
you have the memory of a goldfish."*

## Fundaframe

*The Hour of Living* is the first feature film in history to be financed on a frame-funded basis. Fundaframe is a crowd-funding scheme we set up originally for our second short. It worked so well that we felt encouraged to try it on our first feature, and again people helped us by funding anything from one frame (worth £1.96) to more than a minute (several thousand pounds). Going about it this way has allowed us to work exceptionally fast: from deciding to make the film and starting to write the script (January 2010) to completion (February 2012) it took just over two years. (We know people who spend five years just raising the money...) And by making this film without public funding, without financiers, without sponsorship, without product placements and without subsidy, we've been, and been able to stay, resolutely independent.

## From Folk in a Box to Film in the Can

This is how Sebastian Michael describes his encounter with Pepe Belmonte, who plays The Singer in *The Hour of Living*:

"Finding Pepe Belmonte and his music must be the most exquisite case of serendipity I've ever experienced. I heard Pepe before I saw him, even though I was sitting inches away from him in a box the size of a tool shed, into which I'd let myself be coaxed while waiting for somebody else at what happened to be the Battersea Arts Centre's

One-on-One Festival, about which I knew nothing. But once we started to talk, I began to realise that not only had I found The Singer I was looking to cast for my feature, but that with *The Hermit's Waltz*, Pepe had written, composed and recorded a collection of songs that fits so perfectly with our story, it's as if they had been created especially for it. Eight of the tracks on this album, as well as two additional ones, now feature on the film, and so *The Hermit's Waltz* has effectively become the soundtrack to *The Hour of Living*. And what a wonderful soundtrack it is."

## The Three Hour Hike

It's not quite the same as Werner Herzog lumping a steamer across a muddy hill, but it nevertheless made for a trek to remember when the camera team returned from their one day off in the mountains, having 'gone for a walk'. They'd found this 'beautiful location' where we should, they said, definitely shoot the next day's scene, which was, after all, meant to happen on a mountainside. 'Sounds great. How difficult would it be to get there?' Not difficult at all, they reckoned, a stroll, somewhat uphill.

We distributed water, survival rations of Swiss chocolate and all our equipment and set off at daybreak. Our base - and main location - was at around 1,700m altitude, which is about five and a half thousand feet





## ...and quotes

above sea level. Within the next three hours we covered another 1,000m *vertical difference*: we walked from 5,500 ft to 9,000 ft altitude, carrying everything we needed for the day, including kit, mostly on a steep incline, towards the top, across ice, frozen streams and some pretty loose rocks.

Fortunately, by the time it got dark, we had all made it back down to grassy territory. There was still some distance to cover back to base, but at least you knew if you fell you were more likely to land in a cow pad than tumble down a ravine...

### The Strip on the Beach

You know you've got the right people on your team when they are prepared to take off their clothes to get the right shot. That's what happened on the beach in Polperro, Cornwall, when it became clear that the only way to shoot Jamie walking into the water was to actually walk into the water with him. So DP Gregor Brändli and his two assistants Simon and Moritz stripped to their pants and braved the cold October sea, which they stayed in for several hours.

*"first we have breakfast.  
then we get drunk."*

### Sebastian Michael on...

...working outside the formula:

***I don't believe in doing anything the conventional way. I think as an artist, the least you can do is come up with some new ideas.***

...locking off the camera:

***Stillness in film is dreaded like silence in a conversation. But once you stop fighting it and embrace it instead, it becomes the space that allows your mind to ease into the characters' world.***

...on creating a 'slow burner':

***A film is like a lover: you get considerably more out of them if you commit to the relationship, at least for the duration.***

...his role as a filmmaker:

***The world doesn't need me to make action movies. There are plenty of people who do that extremely well. If there is something I can contribute, I hope it is film for thought.***



## on both sides of the camera

Orson Welles has done it. Woody Allen does it. Clint Eastwood. It's clearly possible. But is it advisable, let alone *necessary* to put yourself into your picture?

Sebastian Michael talks to Coproducer Pascal Verdosci about being in his own film.

**Pascal Verdosci:** *What exactly made you decide to cast yourself as George in your first feature film? After all, George is a leading character and one might think that you'd have your hands full, directing the picture...*

**Sebastian Michael:** Yes. It's an insane thing to do. Looking at it objectively, there is almost no good reason, apart perhaps from the fact that this was done on an extremely tight budget and me casting myself meant not having to allow for an extra body on location... But in all seriousness, it was a case of 'now or never'. I had taken a step back from acting for a while and I was quite happy to concentrate on writing and increasingly also on directing, but in George, there was a part which I felt I could handle, given the right support. It was a part that I could relate to, since George's turmoil is one I feel, to a much lesser extent, quite keenly myself, and although I knew it wouldn't be a stretch too far, he would still be removed from me enough to allow me to treat him

purely as a character. But what really clinched it for me was the fact that I had Adam to codirect. This is still not a very well established practice, and the 'job title' of the codirector doesn't feature yet on many films, but as soon as Adam agreed to direct me in the film, while I myself would keep the overall direction and direct the scenes I wasn't appearing in, I felt that I could risk it.

And it's an enormous risk you take, because of course, if you're crap, then everybody will simply - and rightly - say: if only he hadn't cast himself in it! Whether people will say that or not remains to be seen but certainly the collaboration worked and I'm extremely grateful to Adam for, essentially, giving me this opportunity, by coming on board.

**PV:** *Do you think that being in front of the camera leaves you with less control over the film as a whole?*

**SM:** I couldn't possibly say that I don't have enough control over the film. If anything, I'm over-involved. But then, what's 'over-involved'. I consider this very much *my* film, from an artistic perspective. But in actual fact, it's really *our* film: the whole team's. The aesthetic that Gregor, our DP, brings to it, the to my mind incredibly fine and intuitive acting from Sam as Theo, the gloriously atmospheric songs of Pepe, they to me are the three most powerful cornerstones of this project. Or, to look at it differently, they are the three anchor points that hold the thing in the middle, the script and the story, upright.

*"listen: it's 11 o'clock. werner is not up at 11 o'clock. werner is a man who knows people. he gets about."*





**PV:** Adam, your codirector, has a very different temperament and personality to yours, he's also much younger: did that lead to any conflicts?

**SM:** No.

**PV:** In one word?

**SM:** In one word: no. And that's one of the things that makes me happiest about this project: that it was a genuine collaboration. It's worth bearing in mind that most of us working on this were - and are - learning. I had a very clear idea of what I wanted this film to be like, what it would sound, feel, and look like, and with Gregor, Adam and Sam we had about as diverse and potentially diverging personalities on location as you could wish to imagine. But it didn't lead to conflict. Of course: you get differences of opinion sometimes. And there are occasions when you just don't have the time to discuss them at length, so you have to go with what you think is right. But that would be the case on absolutely any shoot and with any constellation. What is different here is that while you're in front of the camera, the codirector sees what you're doing, and you don't. So you have to be able to trust them, and do so. And that worked extremely well.

I imagine that on bigger shoots, with much better, more experienced actor-directors, you also have a more sophisticated infrastructure and more time, so you can look at what you're doing and to some extent direct yourself. In our film that wasn't

the case: while I was 'on' I depended entirely on the people around me.

**PV:** So, would you do it again?

**SM:** Yes, absolutely. Given this, or a similarly good team, I would do it again. But I'd have to write me another part first...

*"how do you know it was a woman?  
it could have been an alien."*



## contacts

For all enquiries, including press & media, sales and distribution, please contact the office nearest to you:

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*"always remember this: a sausage  
is something to eat, not something to be."*

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