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*Presents*

# THE ORNITHOLOGIST

**A FILM BY JOÃO PEDRO RODRIGUES**

*Starring Paul Hamy and Xelo Cagiao*

## **PRESS NOTES**

*Official Selection:*  
*Locarno Film Festival*  
*Toronto International Film Festival*  
*AFI Festival*  
*Torino Film Festival*  
*International Film Festival Rotterdam*

**Country of Origin:** Portugal | France | Brazil

**Format:** DCP/2.35/Color

**Sound Format:** Dolby SRD

**Running Time:** 117 minutes

**Genre:** Drama

Not Rated

**In Portuguese, Mandarin, and Latin with English Subtitles**

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Please download photos from our website:

<http://www.strandreleasing.com/films/the-ornithologist/>

## **THE ORNITHOLOGIST**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Fernando, a solitary ornithologist, is looking for endangered black storks along a remote river in northern Portugal when he is swept away by the rapids. Rescued by a couple of Chinese pilgrim girls on their way to Santiago de Compostela, he plunges into a dark, eerie forest, trying to get back on track. But as he encounters unexpected and uncanny obstacles and people who put him to the test, Fernando is driven to extreme, transformative actions. Gradually he becomes a different man: inspired, multifaceted, and finally enlightened.

## **THE ORNITHOLOGIST**

### **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION (DIRECTOR: JOÃO PEDRO RODRIGUES)**

#### **INSPIRATION – ORIGINS**

Saint Anthony is a quintessential and ubiquitous figure in Portuguese culture and society. While he is unquestionably the most celebrated saint in the world, his aura holds a very particular influence in Portugal, where he is the most famed Franciscan. This is probably because he was born in Lisbon between 1191 and 1195, and was christened Fernando there. Also because, as with so many other renowned Portuguese, his was a life of travel by land and sea. Many Portuguese know that his boat was cast adrift on a stormy sea on his return from an evangelical mission in Morocco, washing up on the shores of southern Italy. From there he set forth on a legendary journey until he reached Padua, where he died in 1231. Indeed, Padua would be appended to his name in posterity. Along with everyone else, I know why we invoke him, on which occasions we celebrate him and what he stands for. I recognize him in churches, as in art. I acknowledge his presence in me.

While I acknowledge this is cold, objective observation, it is in no way a sign of religiosity. For the Portuguese, Saint Anthony is someone we coexist with, someone we negotiate with, someone for whom we at times show sympathy, others aversion, and yet others just plain curiosity. I wanted to find out how Saint Anthony lived within me. Initially I started this journey without formal research, merely the incomplete pieces of a puzzle, with no great concern for accuracy. I knew Saint Anthony had the ability to understand all languages; that he had brought a young man back to life with a single magic breath; that he'd held the holy Infant in his arms, an embrace he had wished to keep secret. I knew of his fascination with nature and animals; that he'd given up his aristocratic background and wealth to have nothing but the strictly essential, his knowledge and erudition. I knew that he was taken in by the Franciscans after his shipwreck in southern Italy, and of course I knew the legend of the boat that was cast adrift. Indeed, this last image, this lost ship that decided her passenger's fate, would be the point of departure for my story.

Although this character was indeed named Fernando at birth before being re-christened Anthony, and although his boat does go off course and his ability to understand languages is intact, throughout the writing process I allowed my imagination to take me where it wanted to go. The Franciscans became Chinese girls today. Diverted from their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, they welcome him as a comforting, healing presence. Later, the embrace with the infant Jesus turns into an amorous, blissfully blasphemous gesture. And later still, the resurrection by a single breath becomes that of young Tomé. As in legend, the saint speaks to fish; but my most eloquently poetic license was the special relationship with birds.

I have to admit this Fernando, this future Anthony, gradually became imbued with my personal story. While he may live inside me, in a way I returned the favor and made myself live inside him. This character is in a state of transition, of transforming identity (as are most characters in my films), and perhaps this takes on a new meaning as we approach fifty, when we think of the lives we didn't live. I wanted to link Fernando to birds because ornithology, observation and nature hikes are things

I am very familiar with. I studied biology, specifically birds, long before I studied film. Furthermore, there are common points to both pursuits, most obviously the binoculars in one and the camera in the other. Observation, much like the return to nature in Saint Anthony's life, is also a fundamental source element for the film: the wonder of an eagle owl flying across the night sky, the majesty of a soaring black stork, the looming presence of birds of prey. In these moments, the view through binoculars like cinematic vignettes with the flair of silent movies turns the birds into apparitions; fascinating but fearsome shapes, creatures from a different world. They are actual witnesses to the story, similar to the animals along the river in *The Night of the Hunter*. They are all real, but gradually take on a magical dimension.

The reflection on spirituality, started in my film *To Die Like a Man* and evoked by the journey in *The Last Time I Saw Macao*, led me unquestionably to this new project. *The Ornithologist* delves deeper into these contemplations, which take on the form of an initiation journey and an introspective quest. A major relationship takes shape, nevertheless, as Fernando dives further into the unknown. It is the bond with the young shepherd Jesus, who dies and reincarnates in Tomé: the Apocryphal Gospels state that the apostle Tomé/Thomas was Jesus's twin brother. Their carnal relationship is as unexpected as the murder of one by the other. Fernando kills his desire to better find it later, in this new incarnation, Tomé. The two characters are in mutation. They shed their first identity to slip into their second. They are either the same or the twin, but in the end an atypical couple is created, perhaps a love; a bond of master and disciple, of lovers and fellow travellers. The film could also be interpreted as the different symbolic stages of their love story. Homosexual sex mirroring the sacred, mirroring bliss: a humorous and necessary blasphemy in the image of this tragic and improbable existence that has stirred and inspired me. Let them love one another.

## **THE ORNITHOLOGIST**

## **CAST AND CREW BIOGRAPHIES**

### **PAUL HAMY – Fernando / António**

Paul Hamy came to French cinema by chance when he was spotted by Emmanuelle Bercot, who made him her Marco, the young flirtatious man who seduces Catherine Deneuve in *ON MY WAY* (2013). Subsequently, Katell Quillévéré offered him the role of Julien, Sara Forestier's boyfriend in *SUZANNE* (2013), which opened International Critics' Week in Cannes. He played a dark, ambiguous character whose magnetic charm is both seductive and dangerous. For this role, he was nominated for a Most Promising Actor César Award. Mild-mannered and disquieting with an instinctive, feline grace, he quickly became an asset to art-house cinema. With a keenly curious mind and a willingness to transform for any part, he features in and champions short films such as *FADE AWAY* (Romain Chassaing), *MIKADO* (Nicolas Peduzzi), *ERRANCE* (Peter Dourountzis) and *THE SESSION* (Edouard de la Poëze), all 2013-2014. In the role of a professional security guard in *MARYLAND* (Alice Winocour), with Matthias Schoenaerts and Diane Kruger, his unhindered performance and undeniable presence shone through; and in *FRENCH BLOOD* (Diastème, 2015), he plays a crazed right-wing extremist, with Alban Lenoir. Always drawn to strong and unique characters, he has worked with directors such as Maiwenn (*MY KING*), Danielle Arbid (*PARISIENNE*) and Sylvie Verheyde (*AMOUREUX SOLITAIRES*). He has also featured in films by Philippe Grandrieux (*MALGRÉ LA NUIT*, 2016) and will soon appear in movies by F.J. Ossang and Fanny Ardant. João Pedro Rodrigues offered him the leading role in *THE ORNITHOLOGIST* (2016).

### **JOÃO PEDRO RODRIGUES – Writer / Director**

João Pedro Rodrigues began by studying Biology to become an ornithologist, but soon gave it up for cinema and graduated from Lisbon Film School. His work explores human desire in all its guises and disguises, reflecting the multifarious history of film, from classic genres to documentary and experimental film. He directed five features: *O FANTASMA* (2000), *ODETE* (2005), *MORRER COMO UM HOMEM / TO DIE LIKE A MAN* (2009), *A ÚLTIMA VEZ QUE VI MACAU / THE LAST TIME I SAW MACAO* (2012) - co-directed with João Rui Guerra da Mata - and *O ORNITÓLOGO / THE ORNITHOLOGIST* (2016). He also directed several shorts, some with Guerra da Mata, a body of work they like to call their "Asian films". Rodrigues's films premiered and won prizes at the world's foremost film festivals, including Cannes, Venice, Locarno and Berlin. In 2014-2015 he was a Radcliffe-Harvard Film Study Center Fellow, and Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation Fellow, at Harvard University. In 2015-2016 he returned to Le Fresnoy, Studio national des arts contemporains, as guest artist. Lately he has also been developing work for museums and art galleries: "Santo António" / "Saint Anthony", created with Guerra da Mata for the Mimesis Art Museum in South Korea (26/11/2013 - 9/02/2014) was his first exhibition. A four-channel video installation, part of the Korean exhibition opened in October 2014 at the Johnson-KuluKundis Family Gallery at the Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, USA. "Do Rio das Pérolas ao Ave" / "From the Pearl River to the River Ave" (02/07 - 25/09/2016) at Solar, Cinematic Art Gallery in Vila do Conde, Portugal, is Rodrigues and Guerra da Mata's newest exhibition. From November 25th 2016 until January 2nd 2017, he will have a complete joint retrospective and exhibition with João Rui Guerra da Mata, at the Pompidou Center in Paris. His newest film, *THE ORNITHOLOGIST*,

is a personal revisitation of Saint Anthony's life, in a contemporary journey across Portugal's remotest areas and popular mythology.

**THE ORNITHOLOGIST**

**CREDITS**

Directed By

João Pedro Rodrigues

Written By

João Pedro Rodrigues  
João Rui Guerra da Mata

Produced By

João Figueiras  
Diogo Varela Silva

Co-Producers

Antoine Barraud  
Gustavo Angel Olaya  
Vincent Wang  
Alex García  
Maria Fernanda Scardino

Director of Photography

Rui Poças

Production Designer

João Rui Guerra da Mata

Editor

Raphaël Lefèvre

First Assistant Director

Paulo Guilherme

Costume Designer

Patrícia Dória

Music By

Séverine Ballon

Sound Mixer

Nuno Carvalho

Special Makeup Effects

Rita de Castro

Production

Blackmaria, House on Fire and Ítaca Filmes  
Le Fresnoy - Studio national des arts contemporains

## **CAST**

Fernando/António

Jesus/Tomé

Fei

Ling

Caçadora 1

Caçadora 2

PAUL HAMY

XELO CAGIAO

HAN WEN

CHAN SUAN

FLORA BULCAO

ISABELLE PUNTEL