

SET REPORT

ONLY THE LONELY

It's been a long road back for indie wunderkind Harmony Korine, but his new project finds him brimming with enthusiasm and working with a starry cast. He tells **FIONNUALA HALLIGAN** how the dark years helped create his "best work"



Samantha Morton as Marilyn Monroe

It has been a decade since *Gummo* and a good eight years since *Julien Donkey-Boy*, and Harmony Korine is finally back behind the camera with *Mister Lonely*. He co-scripted the story about celebrity impersonators — the key characters being "Michael Jackson" and "Marilyn Monroe" — with his younger brother Avi, the first time the writer of *Kids* has collaborated on a screenplay. That, however, is possibly the least unusual part of *Mister Lonely*.

Shot in the jungles of Panama (where Korine's parents live), Scotland and Paris, *Mister Lonely* is about a Michael Jackson impersonator living in Paris, played by Diego Luna, who runs into a Marilyn Monroe impersonator (Samantha Morton). He ends up in a Scottish-based commune of impersonators including Marilyn's husband Charlie Chaplin (Denis Lavant) and their daughter Shirley Temple, not to mention the Queen of England (Anita Pallenberg), the Pope (James Fox), Madonna (a British profes-

sional Madonna impersonator) and Abraham Lincoln (Richard Strange).

Running through this story, somehow — Korine will not be drawn — is the Panama thread which features magician David Blaine and Werner Herzog.

At \$8.2m, *Mister Lonely* is a considerable step up for a Harmony Korine project, although admittedly it is only his third as director. It is being produced by the French fashion designer Agnes B's production company, Love Streams, and her artistic venture with Korine, the UK-based O'Salvation (Harmony has recently become a UK citizen, but more of that later).

The film is executive produced by Recorded Picture Company and billed as a 'presentation' by Agnes B and Jeremy Thomas; HanWay has UK and US rights, with Tartan picking up UK, and Celluloid Dreams is on board for international sales (a key territory already concluded is Japan, to Gaga).

Samantha Morton and Denis Lavant in *Mr Lonely*



Early highs

Mister Lonely is being readied for Cannes and after a lengthy spell in the film wilderness, Korine is definitely back — he has two more projects ready to roll, with which Agnes B wants to be involved. Agnes, a grandmother, helped the troubled 34-year-old get his life back on track after they first met at Venice at the premiere of *Julien Donkey-Boy*.

"She let me lean on her. I don't mean financially — she was there," says Korine of the Paris-based designer. "She let me work myself out."

On set outside Paris last summer, Korine — who wrote *Kids* when he was 19 — is a strong, enthusiastic presence, energising the cast and crew and working tightly with young Danish DoP Marcel Zyskind (Michael Winterbottom's close collaborator).

"I've enjoyed it immensely," Korine later tells *Screen International* during post-production in London. "Before, it was all very easy for me; I graduated high school and I was making my first movie. I directed *Gummo* when I was 23. For this movie, it was so difficult to get back to a point where I could direct again, and I'm not talking financially. I thought if I couldn't enjoy the process, I shouldn't be making movies. Let's just say I'm really appreciative to be making films again."

He admits that in the past "I might not have had the coping mechanisms" to deal with stressful situations but it has been different on *Mr Lonely*, he says. The director, endearingly open and not the disturbed presence press clippings might indicate, is vague about a lot of things in his life, but not in an evasive way. It is hard to get a clear picture of Korine's last eight years, perhaps because Korine himself does not have one.

Denis 'Chaplin' Lavant and Harmony Korine on set



FEATURE FILMS DIRECTED AND/OR WRITTEN BY HARMONY KORINE

2007 *Mister Lonely* (director, writer)

2002 Larry Clark's *Ken Park* (writer)

1999 *Julien Donkey-Boy* (director, writer)

1997 *Gummo* (director, writer)

1995 Larry Clark's *Kids* (writer)



He talks openly about having been in rehab. Yes, he says, two of his houses did burn down in the US and "I lost everything that I had ever owned". Also it is true that he left America to live between Paris and London, although he does not have a home in either place and is still living out of a suitcase. He now has UK residency.

But working on *Mister Lonely*, he says he finally has the emotional stability he lacked. He started collaborating on the script with Avi, eight years his junior, more than two years ago. "I needed additional motivation or somebody there to help me get back into the discipline of writing," says Korine. "For me to say I lost interest in making movies would almost be like giving myself too much credit. The implication would be that I had a choice in the matter, when the truth of it is somehow it left me, if that makes any sense.

Desperate hours

"I'd been making movies since I was virtually a kid, and it had always come very easily. At a certain point after the last movie, I started to have this general disconnect from things. I was really miserable with where I was. I began to lose sight of things and people started to become more and more distant. I was burnt out, movies were what I always loved in life and I started to not care. I went deeper and deeper into a dark place and to be honest movies were the last thing I was thinking about — I didn't know if I was going to be alive. My dream was to evaporate. I was unhealthy. Whatever happened during that time, and I won't go into details, maybe it was something I needed to go through."

Korine stresses that he could not "have made this movie without that period". Describing *Mister Lonely* as much different to anything he has done before, he says it's "more classic, at least in style. I still try to play with actors the same way I always have, I still try to push actors, but the way I shot it was much more structured".

On set in a hot Paris, and after three tiring weeks on location at Duncraig Castle, Plockton, in the Scottish Highlands, his *Mister Lonely* team agrees. Says Oscar-nominated make-up artist Jo Allen (*The Sea Inside*, *The*

Hours): "He's the best guy I've ever worked with, hand on heart."

Given she has just produced heavy make-up for 17 iconic characters on a budget of \$15,700 (£8,000), that is quite a compliment. But Korine's leading man and lady, Luna and Morton, both attached to the project from an early stage, are equally complimentary.

"His work has always moved me incredibly," says Morton, looking remarkably like Marilyn Monroe in a take on the classic halterneck dress designed by Agnes B herself. "I said yes before I read the screenplay, but when I did read it, I honestly thought it was the most beautiful movie I'd ever read."

As far as shooting goes, she says: "Sometimes it's incredibly tight with what he needs to be shot and the way he's constructed his canvas, and sometimes incredibly loose. But Harmony is very sure what he wants to get; it doesn't feel random at all."

'I always felt like someone was saying, Here kid, you wanna make a movie? Take a million'

Harmony Korine

Copy cast

Diego Luna, in particular, was struck by the project from the get-go. Not a particular fan of Jackson's as a child, he trained with an impersonator in Mexico, "trying to get a few moves together" and working on his make-up.

"As an actor, it's an amazing role to do, and with a director like Harmony, it's a dream," he says. "This is not about Michael Jackson but a guy who's an impersonator, and from what we know about Michael Jackson, he's playing a role, too, so it's a challenge."

To see how it was working out, Luna "came by myself to Paris the week before we started shooting and went to the Pompidou Centre and started to dance, busking, I did about half an hour, 40 minutes, I made \$9 (€7). That's more than I'm getting for this movie," he jokes.

Korine says he was heartened by the willingness people displayed to go the extra mile for him. Financing *Mister Lonely* took a while from



Diego Luna recreates some classic Michael Jackson moves

Korine's point of view: "A year," he estimates. "But relative to the grand scheme of things, I don't know if that's a long time. It felt like a lot. My other films were always under \$2m from a single source and I always felt like someone was saying, 'Here kid, you wanna make a movie? Take a million.' I've never ever been told what to do on a film. So this time, there's a little more expectation, and a lot more structure."

Says Recorded Picture Company's Jeremy Thomas: "I was fascinated by Harmony's previous films, *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-Boy*. When an opportunity arose to join the *Mister Lonely* project, which had an amusing and pertinent central theme, we did so with enthusiasm."

Although *Mister Lonely* is scripted, scenes being shot in an old people's home in the Ville de Bonnueil, an hour outside Paris, and the next day in the Luxembourg Gardens and Montparnasse, show typical Korine improvisational touches. In the retirement villa, where 'Michael'

MISTER LONELY

Directed by Harmony Korine
Written by Harmony Korine and Avi Korine

Produced by Nadja Romain (O'Salvation, UK)

Executive producer Peter Watson (Recorded Picture Company, UK)

Presented by Agnes B and Jeremy Thomas

Director of photography Marcel Zyskind

Editors Paul Zucker, Valdis Oskarsdottir

Production designer Richard Campling

Music composed by Jason Spaceman, The Sun City Girls

Costume designer Judy Shrewsbury

Hair and make-up design Jo Allen

MAIN CAST

Diego Luna Michael Jackson
Samantha Morton Marilyn Monroe

Denis Lavant Charlie Chaplin

James Fox The Pope

Werner Herzog Father Umbrillo

Leos Carax Renard

Anita Pallenberg the Queen