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Son of Saul (15)

dir: László Nemes

Starring: Géza Röhrig, Levente Molnár

Sponsor: Jonathan and Shuna Killin

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Synopsis: A Nazi death camp in the final months of World War 2. Saul Ausländer, a Hungarian Jew, is a *Sonderkommando* - a prisoner granted certain privileges in return for helping guards with other prisoners. After shepherding new arrivals into the gas chamber, he finds a young boy who has survived the gas and decides to give him a Jewish burial. He searches for a rabbi among the prisoners. He becomes involved in a plot to organise a breakout, but makes a mess of an important mission. He finds a man claiming to be a rabbi, but finds he is an imposter. Saul loses the body while trying to cross a river. He retreats with others into the forest. He sees someone he believes is his son, who runs away. A group of armed German soldiers appear: there is a volley of gunfire.

Has there ever before been a film where so much of the action happens off-screen? For much of its length, László Nemes' film - amazingly, his feature debut - holds its close-up gaze on the grimly obsessed features of its protagonist, Saul Ausländer (Géza Röhrig) - or, Dardennes style, on the back of his head. Meanwhile the soundtrack assaults our ears with a cacophony of barked orders in German ("Schnell! Arbeit!, Los!") , a hubbub of voices in Hungarian, Polish and Yiddish, police whistles, gunshots, screams, metallic clankings and grindings. Much of what does show on the screen is at the edge of the frame or out of focus, with figures appearing as dark, fuzzy shadows.

Some of the time, we're left to guess what the offscreen noises indicate. At other times, it's all too easy to tell, as in the devastating opening sequence when the latest trainload of Jewish prisoners, having hung their clothes on hooks, are ushered naked into the shower while a reassuring voice tells them that their various skills will be needed in the camp, and that soup and hot coffee will be ready for them once they've showered. "Don't forget your hook number," the voice adds solicitously. The door closes with a heavy, ominous clang: a moment later we hear muffled screams and hammerings on the door. Not for long, though.

Nemes uses that same lethal clang to close several sequences, pairing it with a cut to black, as if to convey that everyone held in the camp, no matter their status, is effectively in the death chamber. From this perspective, Saul's desperate quest to find a rabbi to say Kaddish over the dead boy he claims to be his son is perhaps ultimately no more futile than the



plotting of his fellow *Sonderkommandos* (privileged prisoners who help control the rest) to escape. "You failed the living for the dead," he's told when his monomania causes him to botch a vital mission; but from this abyss - as the film's last offscreen sound effects tell us - no one on the end can escape.

Is the boy Saul finds gasping and all but dead, sole survivor of the gas chamber, really his son? A fellow prisoner who evidently knew Saul before insists that he never had a son, though if he did and the boy was born (as he suggests) outside his marriage, there's a hint that the young woman called Ella, with whom he has a charged, near wordless exchange, might be the mother. In the final analysis it hardly matters. In the film's closing moment, Saul sees another boy, alive this time, and his joyous smile tells us that this putative son, real or not, has become his purpose - a personal expiation for what he's done to his fellow Jews and a reason for persisting. As Nemes commented, when he accepted his Oscar for Best Foreign Language film in 2016, "Even in the darkest hours, there might be a voice within us that allows us to remain human."

We're never told in which camp the film is set though given that all the Hungarian Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and that an actual rebellion by *Sonderkommandos* took place there in 1944, we can assume this is the intended location. An indication of the date comes in a snatch of whispered conversation suggesting that Soviet forces are about to take Krakow, which would place the action in January 1945. Certainly, the increasing urgency, even desperation, with which the prisoners are despatched, would bear this out; since the ovens are full of bodies, a later trainload of new arrivals bypass the gas chamber altogether, and are shoved straight into a pit and burnt.

All this chimes with the callous terminology of assembly-line extermination; dead bodies are "pieces", money and valuables harvested from the dead are "the shiny". Repeatedly, we're shown the *Sonderkommandos* shovelling up great heaps of the grey ashes to which the camp's victims

have been reduced, and whose dust chokes the air - the living, soon to die themselves, are literally breathing in the dead. At the same time, there's a determination that future generations should know the truth: we see inmates taking photographs with smuggles cameras, or writing diaries to be concealed in the hope of later discovery, messages from the dead to the living.

It has sometimes been suggested that there's little more to be said, in cinematic terms, about the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust; that has been churned over too often. The single-minded power and visceral immediacy of Nemes's achievement, rightly acclaimed and awarded, proves otherwise.

Credits

Géza Röhrig	Saul Ausländer
Levente Molnár	Abraham Warszawski
Urs Rechn	Obercapo Biederman
Todd Charmont	Bearded prisoner
Jerzy Wolczak	Rabbi Frankel
Gergó Farkes	Saul's son
Balász Farkes	Saul's son
Sándor Zsótér	Dr Miklos Nyiszli
Marcin Czarnik	Feigenbaum
Levente Orbán	Russian prisoner
Kamil Dobrowolski	Mietek
Uwe Lauer	Oberscharführer Voss
Christian Harting	Oberscharführer Busch
Attila Fritz	Jankl (young prisoner)
Mihály Kormos	Schlojme
Marton Agh	Apikoyres (Greek rabbi)
Amitai Kodar	Hirsch (gold collector)
István Pion	Katz
Juli Jakab	Ella
Támás Polgár	Landesman
Rozi Székely	Female kapo
Erno Fekete	SS doctor
László Somorjai	Old rabbi
Director	László Nemes
Screenplay	László Nemes, Clara Royer
Cinematography	Mátyás Erdély
Editing	Matthieu Taponier
Composer	László Melis
Sound design	Tamás Zányi
Costume	Edit Szücs
Production design	László Rajk

Hungary 2015. 107 mins

Another View

In interviews, the Hungarian director László Nemes has been clear about the purpose of his Oscar-winning debut *Son of Saul*. Borrowing the phrase James Cameron used for his sci-fi opus *Avatar*, Nemes has said he too wants to "immerse" the audience in his film. But his isn't a fantasy: it is set in Auschwitz in October 1944

You may already be scrolling down the page, making a sincere mental note to catch up with it one day. I couldn't blame you. I can only say the film is, by its own measure, a triumph. Engineered with virtuoso skill, every moment screams *You Are Here*. And here is hell.

Our first sight of Saul is his back: an X daubed on his shirt. His surname completes the singling out: Ausländer, the German for stranger. A Hungarian Jew, Saul belongs to the Sonderkommando, the Jewish work units forced by the Nazis

to assist in the mechanics of the death camps. They dispose of corpses, remove gold fillings, and so unthinkably on. "Deprived of even the solace of innocence," Primo Levi wrote of them, perhaps the cruellest atrocity of all.

Then we see his face. From here, that is our default: the gaunt, stunned features of actor Géza Röhrig (more commonly a poet, here transcendent). Tightly framed, they are often the only thing in focus. Most of the film's horrors take place out-of-shot, or in the background, heard more than seen. This is how we experience the first transport of prisoners: the racket of the train, the dogs, the voices promising hot soup after the showers. Saul's task is to hasten the unwitting new arrivals into the gas chambers. Once the door is closed, he must wait outside, and listen.

But something like a miracle emerges: a young boy, still alive, just long enough to be smothered by a doctor. Soon, Saul reveals that this was his son. And here where the dead are called "pieces", he absconds with the body, obsessed with giving the child a religious burial.

We too cling to this flailing act of humanity. And yet the gesture is complex, as we come to understand. An escape is planned by the other Sonderkommando. Not only does Saul barely register it — his mania gets in the way.

Similarly, despite the adulation the film has received, there have been objections: that it calls too much attention to its technique, that even its use of colour is dubious. (The sombre black-and-white of *Schindler's List* was, of course, its own aesthetic choice.) Nemes should be pleased with the dissent. "Here there is no Why" — uttered by a guard to Levi — was the credo of Auschwitz. Divided opinions are their own kind of tribute to a film that demands *Why* in every frame.

Danny Leigh

Our next film - February 3rd, 7.30pm Truman (Spain 2015. 15)

Ricardo Darín (last seen at LFS in *Wild Tales*) stars as Julián, an actor who has decided that he will no longer seek treatment for his terminal illness. His close friend Tomás visits him unexpectedly and, over 4 days together, they review their friendship and discuss Julián's decision. But Tomás's concern for his friend is nothing compared with that Julián has for his aging dog, Truman.

This little gem of a film, dealing with an issue we all face, is by turns amusing and affecting — and quite often both at once. It's has hardly been seen in this country so we have a rare chance to catch it.

Programme news

The three films to fill the gaps in the season are

March 31st - The Clan (Argentina/Spain 2016. Cert 15)

April 21st - Under the Shadow (UK/Qatar/Jordan/Iran 2016. Cert 15)

May 6th - Julieta (Spain 2016. Cert 15)

These titles are subject to confirmation. Full details will be provided soon.

Please note the change of date for *Julieta*. The original date as published in the programme (May 5th) is no longer available. The film will still start at 7.30pm.