



GRAND PRIX
SON OF SAUL

Director: László Nemes
Writer: László Nemes, Clara Royer
Stars: Géza Röhrig, Levente Molnár, Urs Rechn
Runtime: 107 minutes

PLOT: In the horror of 1944 Auschwitz, a prisoner forced to burn the corpses of his own people finds moral survival upon trying to salvage from the flames the body of a boy he takes for his son.

REVIEW: Saul Auslaender (Geza Rohrig) slowly walks into focus at the start of Son of Saul, but the camera will then rarely leave him until the end. In a long sequence shot without any dialogue, the Hungarian Saul is seen doing his Sonderkommando job in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where another large group of Jews is chaotically escorted to the changing rooms and then into the "showers." The second the doors of the gas chamber are closed, Saul robotically starts emptying all the clothes hooks on the wall, while the screaming and banging from within the chamber quickly reaches an unbearable level, though Saul hardly seems to notice, until one day when he discovers the corpse of a young boy he claims is his son.

Any first feature that manages to land directly in the competition in Cannes has done something right, and director Laszlo Nemes takes a well-known cinematic subject, the Nazi concentration camps, but distils his narrative to the story of just one man: the titular Saul.

Nemes's film is the winner of the Grand Prix at this year's Cannes Film Festival. The film features very few dialogues, instead relying on visuals and direct sound (there's no score) to advance the story. This augments the raw sense of urgency and directness of a lot of the action. It pushes its vision to the bitter end, eschewing emotion, reflection, or intellectual framing as if banned at gunpoint from any such lapses.

Reviewed by INTISAB SHAHRIYAR



BEST DIRECTOR AWARD

NIE YIN NIANG (THE ASSASSIN)

Director: Hou Hsiao Hsien
Writer: T'ien-wen Chu
Stars: Qi Shu, Chen Chang, Satoshi Tsumabuki
Runtime: 105 minutes

PLOT: Based on a short story written during Tang dynasty, "Nie Ying Niang" is a story about assassin Nie's mission to assassinate a political rival.

REVIEW: The story begins amidst the volatile power plays and political instabilities that marked the decline of the Tang Dynasty. It's here that we first meet Nie Yinniang (Shu), who was abducted from her family at the age of 10 by a nun, Jiaxin (Sheu Fang-yi), who trained her to become an exceptionally lethal assassin tasked with killing corrupt officials. A lithe but imposing vision clad entirely in black, Yinniang gives us a taste of her prowess when she coolly executes a man on horseback. But Yinniang's ruthlessness fails her when she confronts another target and, moved by the presence of his young son, chooses to spare his life, spurring Jiaxin to send her protegee on a mission that will both punish her and

rid her of all pity.

Freely reimagined from a story written by the Tang Dynasty scribe Pei Xing, titled "Nie Yinniang" after its formidable female protagonist, "The Assassin" employs the sort of rigorously off-center storytelling devices that will prove immediately recognizable to Hou's worldwide fanbase: a dense historical narrative laid out with unobtrusive intricacy, a masterfully distanced sense of camera placement, and an attentiveness to mise-en-scene that is almost Kubrickian in its perfectionism, as if a single absent detail or period inaccuracy would cause the whole thing to collapse.

This is a work of strange and subtle power, unlike anything else that has screened at Cannes this year, and an extraordinary comeback from the exceptional Hou Hsiao Hsien. It was so impressive that it managed to win him the Best Director Award for this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Reviewed by INTISAB SHAHRIYAR

PALME D'OR
DHEEPAN

Director: Jacques Audiard
Writer: Jacques Audiard, Thomas Bidegain
Stars: Jesuthasan Antonythasan, Kalieaswari Srinivasan, Claudine Vinasithamby
Runtime: 109 minutes

PLOT: Refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka attempt to build new lives in France.

REVIEW: It begins with a short sequence in Sri Lanka: the civil war is over; the Liberation Tigers are burning their dead comrades' bodies and swapping fatigues for civilian clothes to try and melt into the general population. In a refugee camp, a young woman is looking for unaccompanied children to be part of a hastily thrown together fake family, to help one such fighter get clear of the battle zone and into Europe. The three of them, strangers to each other, eventually find themselves in France, and we watch them attempting to adapt to the precarious new reality: negotiating their way through an immigration hearing, peddling tat on the pavements, scattering at the inevitable shout of "les flics!"

The man, going by the name Dheepan (Antonythasan Jesuthasan), eventually gets a job as a caretaker, and the trio make their way to a run-down housing estate; a recently abandoned flat is opened up and given to them to make their home. The arrival of a recently released prisoner, Brahim (Vincent Rottiers) about halfway into the film, triggers a dramatic change. Reclaiming leadership of



the gang, his presence infuses events with a sort of trigger-happy nervousness which leads to an explosive climax.

Jacques Audiard's new film about a former Tamil Tiger fighter looking for a new life in France, certainly has some of the director's trademark ferocity, especially in its final minutes, but it displays what can only be described as dialed-down Audiard. Indeed, much of the time it even ambles, peacefully, with nothing much happening.

While there are some elegantly framed shots, this is, by and large, an old-school social-realism drama. All you'll want is for this "family" to come together and find some happiness. And if it makes you think before you shoo away immigrants trying to sell you junk on the street, this can only be a good thing, too.

Reviewed by INTISAB SHAHRIYAR