

MOVIES

TONY

A coming-of-age film through the lens of a biopic

SHARAR CHOWDHURY

**This review contains spoilers*

I went into *Tony* knowing very little about Anthony Bourdain. I knew he was loved in the food world, that his television shows took him all over the planet, and that he once shared a plastic-stool dinner with a US president, Barack Obama, in Hanoi. I also knew about his death in 2018 and how hard it hit people far beyond the kitchen. That turned out to be the right amount to know, because *Tony* is not interested in any of it.

Directed by Matt Johnson, the film takes a few pages of *Kitchen Confidential,* Bourdain's 2000 memoir, and stretches them into a single summer in 1975. Anyone expecting a kitchen drama in the mould of *The Bear*, all brigades and shouting, will not find it here. Instead, it is about a 19-year-old who does not yet know who he is.

That 19-year-old, played by Dominic Sessa, wants to be a writer, and the film opens with him pitching himself for a fellowship that would take him to New York. He is arrogant about it and certain he has won. He has not. Rather than tell anyone, he lies to his family and follows a girl, played by Emilia Jones, to Provincetown, only to find she already has a boyfriend. So, he drinks, picks fights, and lives entirely in the moment, which is how he gets himself thrown out of a seafood restaurant by its chef.

That chef, named Ciro, played by Antonio Banderas, becomes



the first of two men who shape the rest of Tony's summer. He is principled and devout, takes Tony to Mass, and teaches him the old-fashioned way, with buckets of cold water and the worst jobs in the kitchen.

The second is Sal, a cook played by Leo Woodall. Ciro calls him a "sin eater", which was my favourite line in the film. In old folk tradition in Wales and the English border counties, a sin eater was usually a poor man who paid a few coins to eat bread and drink ale over a coffin, taking the dead person's sins onto himself so their soul could rest. The community needed him and shunned him for it. Sal is the kitchen's version, the one who soaks up everyone else's worst habits, and he strings Tony along with him.

Between them, Ciro and Sal offer Tony two directions, and the film does not explicitly tell you the right one. Nobody in it is purely good or purely bad. Ciro is kind but hard, Sal is fun until he is dangerous, and Tony himself lies, fights, and makes as many poor decisions as good ones. They are simply the people who happened to be around him during the summer that decided who he would become.

That is why *Tony* works better as a coming-of-age film than as a biopic. Take away the famous name and it is a story most of us will recognise: heading somewhere unfamiliar, wanting nothing more than to be loved, telling your family things are going better than they are, and coming out the other side knowing a little more about who you are and what you want to do. By the end, Tony has chosen the kitchen and is taking his first real steps towards becoming a chef.

Most people know what came after: years in New York kitchens, the books, the shows, and the fame. *Tony* is about the summer before any of that was certain. I came out wanting to know how that 19-year-old became the man on the plastic stool in Hanoi, and his books seem like the place to start.

Sharar Chowdhury is learning how to be a manager and believes "I'm confused" is not a complete sentence. Send him emails at: sharar672@gmail.com.

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