

## ✓ **Son of Saul (Saul fia) (15) Hungary 2015**

**5 March 2018**

DIRECTOR: **László Nemes**

Running time: 107 minutes (Hungarian with English subtitles)

LEADING PLAYERS: **Géza Röhrig** (Saul Ausländer), **Levente Molnár** (Abraham Warszawski), **Urs Rechn** (Oberkapo Biederman), **Sándor Zsótér** (Dr. Mikos Nyiszli), **Gergő Farkas** (Saul's son), **Balázs Farkas** (Saul's son), **Jerzy Walczak** (Rabbi Frankel).

SCRIPT: **László Nemes** and **Clara Royer**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Mátyás Erdély**. EDITING: **Matthieu Taponier**.  
MUSIC: **László Melis**.

As can be seen by the tick symbol, members voted for this film on the questionnaire in large numbers: in spite of the gruelling subject matter, they were not about to let such a critically lauded work pass unappreciated. And yet, I am not sure if they quite appreciate how gruelling it might be.

Before looking at what makes *Son of Saul* special, it might be useful to take a brief tour of the Holocaust on film. First, there was *Night and Fog*, with its shocking actuality footage, much of it taken upon liberation of the death camps. Then the TV drama *Holocaust* and the nine-hour documentary by Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*. Eight years later, cinema finally took the plunge with Spielberg's *Schindler*, a drama that dealt with the subject obliquely and, to some people's mind, turned the unspeakable into art, and then into a kind of moral victory. Then there was Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, which infamously mined the subject for comedy and fable. The TV drama *Conspiracy* meanwhile depicted the Wannsee conference, at which Heydrich and Eichmann laid out their plans for resolving the 'Jewish problem'. Alongside these more or less explicit treatments of the Final Solution, it formed the backdrop to films as diverse as *The Pawnbroker*, *Sophie's Choice*, *X-Men*, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas*, and now *Denial*.

All the while the challenge has been this: how to use aesthetic means (the camera being a tool which selects, composes, mediates through another gaze) to do justice to the obscene barbarity without aggrandising or trivialising, least of all beautifying the events. Bathos must be avoided at all costs (unless you were Benigni), but so must undue sentimentality. Dignity must be preserved, and not just for the victims, cartoon villainy as counter-productive as cartoon Jewishness. Lanzmann's solution was to interview the survivors; Spielberg's was to turn up the violence, and film in black and

white: American audiences would be so stunned by both they wouldn't think to question the tastefulness of it all.

What Nemes does in the present film is quite different, on two levels. The first is dramaturgical. Our main protagonist is Saul, a Sonderkommando, and thus granted certain privileges over other prisoners, but let us be under no illusions: he is doomed. Abandon all hope, etc. and welcome to European cinema. Saul's actions turn around securing a rabbi's services so that prayers can be said over the body of what is, in all likelihood, not his son; in so doing he neglects his responsibility towards the living, including those plotting an act of rebellion within the camp.

The second difference is aesthetic again. This time we are deprived the objective viewpoint a director like Spielberg might choose to underline the horror of events, and yet prove himself detached from them (even though a sustained pan in *Schindler's List* past pile upon pile of personal effects is an editorial in itself). No, Nemes responds. A single, unadulterated personal viewpoint is the only morally justifiable one. And so, we remain locked onto Saul's figure throughout the film, so that we cannot be another's gaze (whether character or director), but only our own, following that prisoner.

The first feature of its forty-year-old director, *Son of Saul* won the Oscar, the Golden Globe and the BAFTA for Best Foreign Language film in 2016.

**David Clare**

**Allan Baudoin - Made in London UK (2017)**, directed by William Scothern. Running time: 5 minutes. *Made in London* is a documentary series that profiles artisans of different disciplines.