

Un prophète (A Prophet) (18)

29th November 2010

Director: **Jacques Audiard**
France/Italy 2009

Running time : 155 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Tahar Rahim** (Malik El Djebena), **Niels Arestrup** (César Luciani), **Adel Bencherif** (Ryad), **Reda Kateb** (Jordi the Gypsy), **Hichem Yacoubi** (Reyeb).

SCRIPT: **Thomas Bidegain, Jacques Audiard** based on an original idea by **Abdel Raouf Dafri**.
PHOTOGRAPHY: **Stéphane Fontaine**. EDITING: **Juliette Welfling**. MUSIC: **Alexandre Desplat**.

Let us be clear: *Un prophète* is not an easy watch. Like any film wishing to do justice to the reality of prison life (Hector Babenco's *Carandiru* (2003) is an obvious comparator), it does not shy away from the bestial side of human nature that is brought out when a man is caged up. Selfishness – one's own comforts, promotion, advantage – goes almost without saying; when one adds to that personal survival, then suddenly the commission of unspeakable deeds becomes a possibility. Add to that the consideration that we are talking about people who are already criminals, and there is no wonder the rehabilitation of offenders is a moral/political conundrum.

Such is essentially the set up of Audiard's film. Malik, the lead character, is an Arab without family of his own and without contacts on the inside. If he is not taken under the wing of the Arab prison population, already cowed into impotence by the domination of the Corsican gang, then he is rich pickings and must either cooperate or perish. Minding your own business is not an option, and the prison authorities, at least those within reach, are in the pay of the Corsicans. Their leader, Luciani, is a pretty smart customer, and he has it sewn up.

Soon after his arrival, then, Malik is told by Luciani that he must make advances to another Arab prisoner, one who is in transit and to whom he has been seen talking, and when the time is right kill him. This is the toughest part of the film, so stick with it; it does get less bleak. The irony, of course, is that does so only at the expense of our protagonist's soul, in religious terms. As, by dint of a succession of more or less weighty crimes, he climbs the ladder of self-advancement, he becomes a better criminal, and ultimately leaves prison on the expiry of his sentence fully equipped to ply his trade in society.

Which is pretty bleak; yet because this is a film and Malik is the only character we can root for, we experience his ascent through the circles of hell with a kind of growing relief – and admiration. After all, he not only shows the courage and resilience to survive, he drags himself out of semi-literacy by attending French lessons, and learns the Corsican dialect by observing his masters. He is resourceful enough to look to his own future and pursues a hashish smuggling operation through his contact with another prisoner, le Gitan, or Gypsy. He does this while on day release, an arrangement facilitated by Luciani who wants him to run errands on the outside.

Audiard adopts a gritty aesthetic through all of this, as you might expect. But it is not all naturalistic. One nice touch is the enduring presence in his cell of Reyeb, the victim of that first contract. These visitations are not terrible in the *Macbeth* idiom but oddly consoling, as the shade offers wry comment on Malik's position. The other feature of note is suggested by the title, and that is Malik's unusual ability to glimpse the future, aided by Reyeb.

We leave Malik as he re-enters civilian life with the widow and infant child of Ryad (the inmate who helped in his remedial education), followed by a convoy of sleek vehicles with darkened windows (his new minders?). He is the new *meister*, and he has the tantalising prospect of family life to humanise him, but are we really reassured?

David Clare