

Learning to Read, Murder, Survive

Near the end of “A Prophet,” one of those rare films in which the moral stakes are as insistent and thought through as the aesthetic choices, there’s a scene in which the lead character, Malik, travels to Paris to kill some men. The scene reverberates with almost unbearable tension but is briefly punctured by a seemingly throwaway image: Seconds before he begins shooting, thereby sealing his fate, you see him catch sight of a pair of men’s shoes showcased like jewels in a boutique window in a rich Parisian quarter. He does a double take, a reaction that might mirror that of the anxious viewer who wonders why he doesn’t just get on with it.

Much of what distinguishes “A Prophet” (“Un Prophète”) is revealed in Malik’s brief appreciation of the shoes, as well as the surprise it elicits. He’s window shopping — doesn’t he have some killing to do? Yet these luxury items are resonant, as is their exclusive setting and the way Malik’s admiring gaze momentarily stops the flow of the action: each adds another element to this portrait of an impoverished young Frenchman of Arab descent who is transformed in prison. Over the course of the film Malik will learn to read, to smuggle, to murder, to survive. Which is why when he pauses after unloading his guns, his pale face floating in the sanguineous dark, it looks as if he were emerging from a kind of womb: his metamorphosis is complete.

“A Prophet” was directed by Jacques Audiard, whose talents have deepened with each new film. (His previous one, “The Beat That My Heart Skipped,” from 2005, is a superb remake of “Fingers,” James Toback’s art-pulp thriller.) Like some other prison tales “A Prophet,” which won the grand prize at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, has the flavor of the ethnographic. Its subject is an individual in a context, and while Malik (Tahar Rahim, a stealth presence) is the story’s focus, he’s also part of an inquiry on power. When he first enters prison for a vague crime involving an assault, he arrives as a relative innocent, but, more important to his trajectory, he’s unschooled both as a criminal and a citizen.

His education is sudden and brutal. The film opens with Malik being ordered to strip for the guards on his arrival, a ritualistic divesting (and humiliation) that the inmates and the prison system continue. He soon attracts the unwelcome attention of César Luciani



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Niels Arestrup as the prison gang leader in “A Prophet”

(the tremendous Niels Arestrup), an old lion who rules over the Corsican gang that controls the prison, including some guards. To protect his own, César orders Malik to murder another prisoner, Reyeb (Hichem Yacoubi), also of Arab extraction. Without friends or affiliation, Malik believes he has no choice and carries out the murder with a razor blade that he’s hidden inside his mouth and which he fumbles as the blood gushes over him, his victim, the walls.

It takes a few agonizing moments for Reyeb to die, perhaps because of Malik’s awkwardness, or maybe it



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A Prophet, with Slimane Dazi, left, and Tahar Rahim, as Malik, a young Arab immigrant, in Jacques Audiard’s French prison film, opening Friday in Manhattan

just takes a while to bleed to death. At any rate it is a ghastly vision. But it isn’t simply the gore or Reyeb’s twitching body that make the scene difficult to watch: it’s the way the murder has been messily, even frantically staged and filmed, the two men thrashing inside a frame that can barely contain them. There is nothing exciting about the violence, and there are no beauty shots of the pooling blood. Mr. Audiard effectively turns us into witnesses to a horrible crime, though not in order to punish us for our ostensible complicity in the violence. He is instead, I think, insisting on the obscenity of murder.

This insistence is critical to “A Prophet,” as is the way Mr. Audiard wants you to feel revolted by the murder, even as he encourages you to feel something else for Malik by showing, for instance, how his body continues to tremble after Reyeb’s has stopped shuddering. Mr. Audiard doesn’t sex up Malik’s crimes, turning them into easily digestible spectacles, the kind made to accompany a large popcorn and soda. But he doesn’t solicit our pity: Malik is guilty. Yet guilt is like a poisonous gas in this film, it suffuses the prison, permeating the guards’ rooms and the cells in which corrupt lawyers counsel their murderous clients, and the larger world where politicians make decisions that send some to jail while freeing others.

All this is conveyed discreetly as Malik experiences the banalities of prison along with its shocks, surrealism and spasms of weird comedy. Having killed for César, he essentially surrenders to the Corsicans, for whom he serves a second, parallel sentence and who reward him with racist contempt. César keeps Malik busy running errands, which allows Mr. Audiard to take him (and us) all across the prison and sometimes outside of it. This expands the story and Malik’s horizon, as do some other prisoners, Ryad (Adel Bencherif) and Jordi (Reda Kateb). Every so often Mr. Audiard slows the film down and blacks out some of the image so we can linger on a detail as if to remind us to really look at what we’re watching.

“A Prophet” is about the education of a young man

within a specific social order. You could read it as an allegory about France and its uneasy relations with generations of Arab immigrants and their children. As usual, there is room for diverging, even contradictory interpretations, and the political certainly is as much at play here as the Oedipal. Mr. Audiard, for his part, working from a screenplay he wrote with several others, avoids speeches that explain everything and instead opts for a materialist approach that attends to the realities of prison life, showing how guards and porters deliver the prisoners’ food (baguettes!) and how Malik, as he shakes off César’s grip, helps distribute illicit drugs.

Much as he does inside the prison, Mr. Arestrup, who played the thuggish father in “The Beat That My Heart Skipped,” initially dominates “A Prophet,” boring into the story with unnerving small gestures and the force of his presence. He’s playing another patriarch in this film, of course, the kind who rules small worlds with cruelty. With his overcoats, bulky frame and proud carriage, he can bring to mind the later-life Jean Gabin, though Mr. Arestrup’s terrifying smile quickly snuffs out such nostalgic thoughts. César is not a figure of sentimentality. Among other things he is a businessman, and the cold-bloodedness with which he wields his power might be a matter of personal depravity. It also serves his bottom line.

Like his character, Mr. Rahim’s performance sneaks up from behind. With his wispy mustache and a body that scarcely fills his clothes, Malik makes an unlikely center for such a thrilling film. The camera doesn’t love him, no matter how closely it hovers. But Malik was not meant for our love, and Mr. Rahim’s performance, while strong, is purposefully not flashy, as movie outlaws often are. Mr. Audiard seems to be after something else, and in “A Prophet” he shows us the truth of another human being who might otherwise escape from our sight because he is too foreign, or whom we might try to pity just to feel safe. But the world we make is not necessarily safe, and neither are those we leave alone to fight for their survival.

A PROPHET

A FILM BY JACQUES AUDIARD

(UN PROPHÈTE)



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