



fish

*A Son*  
(Tunisia 2019)

**Spoiler alert: You may prefer to read this review after the screening**

DIRECTOR : Mehdi M. Barsaoui  
RUNNING TIME : 96 mins  
RATING : M

**Synopsis:**

A fascinating descent into a very dark and complex web of moral and ethical decisions. While the film is grounded in the recent Tunisian past, issues of masculinity and paternity that arise when a young boy becomes ill, easily transcend cultural differences.

**Review:**

Not many debuting directors are able to bring subtlety and depth to a heart-rending subject, which is just one reason why Mehdi M. Barsaoui's superb *A Son* deserves significant attention. On the surface, the plot sounds like it could be taken from a hospital TV drama: When a young boy needs a liver transplant, his father discovers he's not the biological parent. Such a bare-bones description does the film no justice, as Barsaoui's sensitive script delves into issues of masculinity and paternity without losing sight of the strong female character and her double trauma as she faces the potential loss of both child and husband.

The first five minutes or so exude such energetic happiness that you know it can't last. It's early September 2011, just months after the Tunisian revolution, and Fares Ben Youssef (Sami Bouajila), his wife Meriem (Najla Ben Abdallah) and their 11-year-old Aziz (Youssef Khemiri) drive south to Tataouine for the last days of their summer holiday. They're the picture of a tight-knit middle-class couple with good jobs (she's just gotten a promotion), liberal friends and a new SUV, enjoying the sense of renewal and freedom ushered in by the fall of the dictatorship — though clearly they benefited under the old system. Then, while driving, they're caught in an ambush and Aziz is shot.

Fares and Meriem arrive at the hospital covered in their son's blood, not knowing if he'll live. The boy's condition is too critical to move him to Tunis, and the surgeons have had to remove 80% of his liver, urgently necessitating a transplant. Cont.

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10.00 am Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2023  
8.15 pm Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> April 2023

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## **Review:** Cont.

Compassionate Dr. Dhaoui (Noomen Hamda) offers cautious comfort, ordering tests to see which parent would be a match for a liver donation. When the results arrive, he calls Meriem into his office alone: She's not the right blood type, and Fares isn't Aziz's biological father. She takes the news in with shock and horrified recognition, silently wondering how she's going to tell her husband.

Barsaoui proves himself far too sensitive a director to show Meriem explaining this to Fares, instead cutting to immediately after, as he walks down the hospital corridor in a daze. Earlier scenes of the intimate relationship between father and son already brought Fares' delight in being a parent to the fore, and now his world has been rocked to its foundations. Terrified of losing his son, distraught he can do nothing to help, and now feeling betrayed as a husband, he lashes out at Meriem, revealing an aggressive side that bursts to the surface. "Did you have many?" he taunts, not allowing her to give an explanation. And then, "At least I had the guts to tell you." That one line says all that's necessary, and the script doesn't elaborate. At some time in the past, their relationship was rocky, he had a dalliance, told her, and then it's likely she too temporarily strayed. For the script to enlarge on the past would have been pointless, since everything is there in that one line, together with Meriem's silent struggle, so movingly depicted by relative newcomer Ben Abdallah. While Fares' inner storm rages in ever expanding ways, her devastation feels like an implosion, and the balance between the two is riveting.

Organ donation is a relatively new thing in Tunisia, and the wait list is too long to offer much hope. Fares avoids interacting with his wife while Meriem desperately tries tracking down the former colleague she slept with that one time 12 years ago. Outside the hospital, Fares is approached by a sympathetic man introducing himself as Mr. Chokri (Slah Msaddak), who takes him to a state-of-the-art private clinic nearby and tells him that for a price, he can have a liver available the following day. The implication is that the organs are coming from people dying in the revolution in Libya, but a bit later, the reality of how the organs are harvested is made horrifyingly clear. Barsaoui largely manages to de-sensationalize even this part, at first discreetly showing only children's legs as they're being herded together, though these sequences are tonally mismatched with the main story. Notwithstanding this temporary distraction, these scenes remain a powerful part of the narrative and add a further punch in the gut.

The even-handed way in which the script gives equal space to husband and wife is one of the film's chief satisfactions, and both actors inhabit their roles with a gripping degree of authenticity. Bouajila is the better known of the two thanks to *Days of Glory*, *Omar Killed Me* and others, and he brings an intense energy to the character, raging against the perceived assault on his masculinity coming from two fronts: One is his helplessness in the face of his son's possible death, and the other as a cuckolded husband (his dalliance, of course, deserves forgiveness, whereas hers ... ). Ben Abdallah's is the quieter role but equally stark in its overwhelming anguish; awards will surely accrue.

Shooting in Scope, DP Antoine Héberlé beautifully captures the closeness of the family at the start, tightly grouped together in the SUV against the expanse of the Tunisian desert, and then uses the space to isolate the characters, each grieving in their own way. Controlled handheld camerawork furthers this intimacy while still allowing for moments of unexpected visual poetry, like a shot of the desert at dawn that allows Fares, and the viewer, to temporarily breathe again before facing the unknown.

## **Some Thoughts on: *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy***

At the end of this film, considering what I might say in a review, I hardly knew where to begin. It's wordy, full of ideas, heavily weighted to the psychological and philosophical. My first impression was of the repeated subjunctives, qualifications and doubts in all the dialogues – 'maybe', 'perhaps', 'I'm not sure', 'I don't know'. This miasma of doubt and confusion seemed impenetrable. But the more I've thought of this film the more I've come to admire it.

The 3 stories are quite independent. There's a "but" to follow that statement, but (!) I'll come to that at the end. It also seemed to me that the characters became more likeable, or perhaps sympathetic, as we progressed through the three, ending with the endearing two women of the third one. The first story had a familiar feeling with the best friend's new man turning out to be the ex of her friend. The office scene between the 2 former partners and their heated discussion about each other's respective faults and feelings revealed vulnerabilities that weren't at first obvious. Their very good looks (common to all the characters in the 3 stories) hid rather than revealed their emotions but that discussion reminded me of various French films where relationships are dissected in excruciating detail. In the final scene in the café, I was at first shocked by the response of the ex-partner in her brutal exposition of the situation to her best friend. A moment later we find that this was an imagined scenario and that her far more gracious and generous behaviour was to leave the café so that her ex and her best friend can pursue their potential relationship.

The middle story was the longest. The mind-boggling scene where the woman reads an erotic passage from the professor's book was one I could almost have laughed at ....and yet, it led to an extraordinary discussion and openness from both characters. I kept wondering why, when the professor was prepared to be so honest, he would insist on leaving his door open. But I think that this was in fact the point; it was not only for professional reasons, but because he literally had nothing to hide. He responds honestly and yes, graciously, to his would-be seducer. She is in turn disarmed by this and honest in return. And here is that theme again – an intellectual discussion which opens into honest feelings. The denouement 5 years later when we find out that she mis-sent the audio file to a wrong address was devastating in its consequences. And the fact that it was the callow youth with whom she was having an affair five years earlier who is now an executive in a literary publishing company made it doubly awful.

The third story was for me the warmest and most appealing, based on chance encounters and missed identity yet full of promise and hope. The role-playing of the two women provided far more of a door to authentic feeling and inner reality, than their actual identities and situation. Was the role-playing a mirror version of the virus which had supposedly corrupted every IT system in the world to the extent that all communication had to return to postal mail and telegraph?

In thinking about these strange stories with their constant tension between formality and hidden emotion, I was reminded again how different is the Japanese culture to our own. The beautiful ritual greetings of bowing and courtesy are respectful, gracious, pleasing... yet they are also distancing, formal, ritualised with implied hierarchy. Strong emotions are kept in check to such an extent that they can be missed altogether, yet in these stories they are expressed with intellectual honesty and rigour. At some stage in the middle story, the professor tells the woman that he admires her resistance to being measured "by society's ruler". He says that this is very difficult to do, but particularly in Japanese society. He could be talking about this director.

**Trish Topp**

## Message from the President

The committee has been choosing films we hope to offer you in the first months of the new FISH year.

This task is becoming increasingly more difficult because of the limited number of foreign film distributors in Australia. The growth of Netflix and other such franchises has further reduced the number of choices available to us.

Nevertheless, we aim to present films of different genres from numerous countries and, in doing so, offer films which you might not otherwise see.

We are indebted to Trish Topp for her most discerning review of *Wheel of Fortune & Fantasy*.

From Japan we travel to Tunisia for our next screening, *A Son*, for which Sami Bouajila won Best Actor at both the Venice FF [2019] and French Cesars [2021].

## Sandra Gillespie

### COMING UP

May	<i>The Rose Maker</i> [France]	Sunday 14 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 16 <sup>th</sup>
June	<i>Hit the Road</i> [Iran]	Sunday 18 <sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 20 <sup>th</sup>



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