

Intimate Malice

The mind games of Jacques Audiard's chilling prison drama

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(Photo: Roger Arpajou/Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics)

Jacques Audiard's febrile, engrossing prison thriller *A Prophet* opens the way tragedies often close, with a man forced to choose between his life and his soul. Malik (Tahar Rahim), a 19-year-old French Arab, is ordered by the prison's most powerful inmate, the aging Corsican mobster César Luciani (Niels Arestrup), to seduce and slit the throat of a fellow Arab. The teen tries everything (blowing the whistle, getting himself thrown into solitary confinement) to keep from becoming a killer, but César is almighty, and so Malik learns (with much dribbled blood) to conceal a razor in his

cheeks and leap from his knees and swing for the jugular. The fatal encounter, when it comes, is gruelingly prolonged, the victim kind and attentive, the violence clumsy and garish, the aftermath chilling. Although he has always been nonreligious and unaffiliated (he grew up in state institutions), Malik is suddenly more than ever a man without a country, protected by Corsicans who call him a “dirty Arab,” despised by Arabs who call him a craven Corsican. But then, slowly, the illiterate Malik learns to read—not just books but the prison itself and the world beyond. With stealth and subtlety, he begins to move between the two cultures and to correct—sometimes brutally—the imbalance of his life.

Audiard is not exactly a cockeyed optimist, but something inside him fights the bleak scenarios to which he’s drawn. He remade James Toback’s fatalistic fever dream *Fingers* as the romantic, relatively upbeat *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, and in *A Prophet*, he seems to be turning De Palma’s *Scarface* inside out and finding the core of self-actualizing inspiration that no climactic hail of bullets could puncture. After Malik’s first murder, Rahim’s face turns hard, yet you can feel the character’s brain ticking; you can read him reading others. Audiard’s camera is extraordinarily intimate: The boundaries disappear between the real and the surreal. Malik lies on his cot beside the man he long ago killed, and we accept that the connection is indelible. The murder was the primal injury from which all else flows.

A Prophet isn’t another of those washed-out blue-gray prison pictures. The colors are warm and saturated, the vistas wide. It’s a long film (more than two and a half hours), and when Malik is allowed to leave the prison for twelve hours at a time and begins to form alliances with Italian, Corsican, and Egyptian gangsters, the connections are hard to follow. That’s the price you sometimes pay, though, for filmmakers who zig and zag and resist clicking into an established groove. Rahim is an exciting, unpredictable presence, and Arestrup’s César has a stature that’s nearly Shakespearean. As his cronies leave him behind, his mask of malevolence slips and we glimpse the desperate, bereft old fool. If *A Prophet* preaches anything, it’s the value of self-reliance