



UN PROPHETE

Spring
Season
2010

N.b. both reviews recount much of the story, both accord the film 5 stars.

Review by Wendy Ide, The Times ():

It's perhaps a little early in the year to be making such bold claims, but *A Prophet*, Jacques Audiard's masterful prison saga, will undoubtedly be considered to be one of the great films of 2010, if not the coming decade.

At two hours and 35 minutes, it's a hefty investment in time, but Audiard keeps the film miraculously free of flab and padding. It's lean, dangerous, urgent: every stark frame is included for a reason.

Audiard, hitherto best known for *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, *Read My Lips* and *A Self-Made Hero*, directs with the effortless economy and muscular sense of purpose of an athlete who has honed his discipline until it's almost an instinctive response. This is staggeringly impressive film-making, a picture which instantly takes its place among the greats of the prison and crime genres.

It not only cements Audiard as the rightful heir to Jean-Pierre Melville, but suggests in terms of confidence, flair and a bruisingly macho candour that he could give *Raging Bull*-era Martin Scorsese a run for his money.

The film follows the prison career of a young Arab called Malik El Djebena (the newcomer Tahar Rahim) who enters prison as an illiterate 19-year-old, a scared animal with a few euros cached in the sole of his sneaker, no family, no connections and no idea of how he is going to survive the next six years behind bars. Uneducated and callow he might be, but Malik is smart enough to realise that his lack of allegiance to any of the prison factions is both his greatest weakness and his ultimate strength.

Malik soon catches the attention of the most powerful group in the prison — the Corsican mafia, led by the formidable César (Niels Arestrup, toadish and venomous). The Corsicans decide that Malik is the man to settle some business for them by murdering a fellow Arab prisoner Reyeb (Hichem Yacoubi). They leave Malik very little choice in the matter. The murder is clumsy, ugly and bloody, and it's shot, like much of the film, with unwavering, uncompromising realism. There are none of the sensational shock tactics of, say, Hector Babenco's Brazilian prison drama *Carandiru*.

But Audiard's boldest move is to spike this brutal, cold-eyed clarity with potent little doses of hallucinatory fantasy. The ghostly presence of Reyeb returns repeatedly to visit Malik and becomes, in a curious way, one of the most profound influences on his life. Audiard's occasional stylistic flourishes are equally effective — in moments of extreme stress, we see Malik's point of view through an oppressive, dark iris that compresses the shot like a clenched fist — it brilliantly evokes the sheer animal terror of the harshly Darwinian world of the French jail.

It's a remarkable performance from Rahim. His Malik initially cowers like a beaten dog, eyes trained on the boots of the other inmates. But as he starts to thrive, teaching himself to read, write and, secretly, to speak the brusque Corsican dialect of his mafia protectors, Malik fills out and takes shape. Rahim's gift is keep hold of something of the gentle, vulnerable essence of his character, even as, by necessity, he forges himself the mental armour of a career criminal.

The threats to his life, present in every sidelong glance from friends or foes alike, gather as Malik juggles his allegiances to the Corsican gang, his overtures to the growing Muslim prison contingent and the ambitious drug-running business he masterminds from behind bars. But as he negotiates the precarious maze of alliances and codes, it seems that Malik is blessed with unusual good fortune and an intuitive instinct for danger that borders on the preternatural.

The ghostly visits from Reyeb, bleeding nonchalantly from the throat and dispensing wisdom, give him guidance. And powers of prophecy are attributed to Malik after a dream allows him to predict a freak car accident — this is the most literal explanation for the film's title, although it has other resonances.

Like the opportunistic protagonist of *A Self-Made Hero*, who embroiders himself a glorious but false history as a French Resistance operative, Malik has the ability to reinvent himself: as a meek dogsbody, a de facto Corsican, a canny lieutenant and as an increasingly devout Muslim and a criminal kingpin who has a ready-made congregation of faithful hoodlums waiting for him when he is finally released.

With the wisdom and the mistakes of his mentors, Malik arms himself until finally he is strong enough to rely on his wits — and conveniently rediscovered faith — alone. And we, the audience, are right there with him until the last frame.

Peter Bradshaw, the Guardian:

Du Rififi Chez les Hommes was the full title of Jules Dassin's classic tough-guy thriller from 1955 – aggro among men. Here, it is more a case of Rififi Among Men and God alike, in a blisteringly powerful prison-gangster picture from the French director Jacques Audiard. It comports itself like a modern classic from the very first frames, instantly hitting its massively confident stride. This is the work of the rarest kind of film-maker, the kind who knows precisely what he is doing and where he is going. The film's every effect is entirely intentional.

Newcomer Tahar Rahim plays Malik El Djebena, a young Arab guy about to start a six-year stretch in prison for what appears to be violence against police officers. He is a 19-year-old petty criminal, and this is his debut in adult detention. Malik is very frightened, cringing almost visibly into his clothes on walking the grim corridors of jail, and into his nakedness when he is inspected by medical officers.

On what is apparently his very first day in the exercise yard, Malik's vulnerability and his very blankness attract the hooded eye of César, the Corsican mobster with the guards in his pocket – incomparably played by Niels Arestrup. César needs someone to whack a fellow prisoner, who is about to incriminate his associates on the outside by turning state's witness. Surrounded by his thuggish courtiers, César curtly summons bewildered small-timer Malik and informs him that he must kill this switch, or be killed himself by César's lieutenants. He will be given instruction on how to do the job, and protection from César's crew for the rest of his term. No arguments: Malik is "in", a murderer. There is no way out.

Trembling Malik now finds himself in a terrifying, almost Greeneian dilemma. Should he refuse? Should he simply submit to death rather than become a murderer? The plan is that Malik must kill his victim, Reyeb (Hichem Yacoubi) with a razor-blade concealed in the roof of his mouth. Pretending to offer him a blowjob in his cell, he must work it out with his tongue and push it forward between his teeth while his face is invisibly at crotch-level, and then stand up and cut the man's throat. The scenes in which Malik must practise doing this in front of the mirror, retching and spitting blood into the sink, are the stuff of pure, scalp-prickling fear: I just can't remember being so tense in the cinema.

This nauseous forced deal between Malik and César appears to become the basis of a strange, unknowable spiritual bargain between Malik and God – or does it? Audiard makes the haunted Malik the centre of an internal crisis, part psychological, part supernatural. The terrible unsought burden of assassinhood transforms him into a grotesque, parodic "prophet" and the agent of César's downfall. Intent on self-betterment, Malik takes classes, learns Corsican-dialect Italian and, to the contemptuous disgust of the Muslim prisoners, becomes the Corsicans' Uncle Tom-ish servant boy.

But poker-faced Malik has big plans; he is rising through the ranks – and laws from the new Sarkozy government about repatriating Corsican prisoners away from mainland French jails now leave César exposed, with no bodyguards. Malik, whom César fears and suspects more than anyone, is his Quisling nemesis, his only companion, and the son he never had or wanted to have.

Audiard has created a long, involved, relentlessly brutal but gripping and thrilling picture; it has the rangy, anecdotal feel of something drawn from real life, but its realism somehow accommodates an eerie supernatural shimmer. Malik has visions which are partly, but apparently only partly, explicable as trauma. The sweat and the machismo are very familiar from the French crime genre, which was revived only recently in the 70s-era *Mesrine* films. The passing of contraband, the defiant songs and shouts and burning garbage being flung from the high courtyard walls surely also summon up memories of Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*. But the movie has its own muscular originality.

Niels Arestrup is all too plausible as the jail gang-boss, coolly proprietorial with prisoners and guards alike, sporting a mask of impassive disdain through which world-weariness and fear gradually surface. But Arestrup and Audiard have found something new in this classic persona. What we see etched on César's face is pathetic loneliness, and the horror of dying alone in prison. His weakness and Malik's future strength – this is the emotional fulcrum on which this tremendous film is structured.

Arestrup was outstanding in Audiard's previous film, *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* – also, intriguingly, in a tense, mutually resentful relationship with a younger man – but here he brings out new strains of desolation. Rahim, too, is a tremendous casting find for Audiard. The film returns us to what should be the biggest cliché in the book: the prison film, with its cells, its shouts, its corrupt guards, its boxes full of prisoners' heartrendingly meagre personal effects. But Audiard also revives the hidden source of our fascination with prisons. They are places of violence and fear, but also of paradoxical freedom – freedom from the ties of outside lives. They are places you can remake yourself, for good or ill, hellish furnaces in which you can smelt a new identity.