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**"MIRACULOUS!"**

- A. O. SCOTT, THE NEW YORK TIMES

**"THIS IS AN ASTONISHING MOVIE!"**

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FROM THE DIRECTORS OF  
**La PROMESSE AND ROSETTA**

# THE SON



A FILM BY JEAN-PIERRE AND LUC DARDENNE

The newest film by the critically acclaimed Dardenne brothers, this extraordinary tale of compassion and connection concerns a divorced carpentry instructor at a vocational training center who finds his life turned upside down by the arrival of a mysterious student.

BELGIUM/FRANCE • 2002 • 103 mins • Color • In French with English subtitles

# Another Kind of Grace Under Pressure

A.O. SCOTT

Usually, movie actors address us head on, or in profile, and when we think of them, we tend to isolate striking facial details eyes, cheekbones, jawline, and so on. But what we see most of Olivier Gourmet, whose performance gives "The Son," a new film by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, much of its devastating power, is the back of his head, which is striking mostly in its sheer ordinariness. Mr. Gourmet plays Olivier, who teaches carpentry to troubled boys in an unidentified Belgian city, and the film follows him quite literally, as the camera chases him on stairs, peeking through his thick glasses and over his rounded shoulders through the routines of his solitary, work-driven existence.

But precisely because he rarely shows his face, which is blunt-featured and plain, as if to suggest that "Belgian movie star" must be an oxymoron — Mr. Gourmet conveys his character's wounded, anxious inwardness. Olivier, stiffened and slowed by a bad back, is impelled by emotions neither he nor the audience, at least at first, entirely understands. When a new boy is assigned to his class, Olivier is seized with anxiety, and then with a compulsive, slightly creepy interest, observing the young man with an enigmatic, watchful gaze.

The connection between them is spelled out soon enough, but in a way that only deepens the mystery of their developing relationship. The new apprentice, Francis (Morgan Marrine), is a sullen, skinny blond teenager. He was responsible for the death, five years earlier, of Olivier's son, a killing that accounts for the dull, stricken look on Olivier's face and also, most likely, for the collapse of his marriage. Francis, for his part, does not know what Olivier knows about him, and seems desperate to find an adult he can trust. Olivier's ex-wife, Magali (Isabella Soupard), is horrified. "Who do you think you are?" she demands. "Nobody would do this." "What do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know," her former husband answers.

The emotional terrain "The Son" stakes out has been plowed over many times before. The death of a child commonly provides warrant either for sentimental psychobabble or (especially when the killer is near at hand and the bereaved parent is a father) for righteous violence. With their uncompromising, almost unbearable rigor and their ruthless refusal of melodrama, the Dardenne brothers mount an implicit critique of the therapeutic nostrums and the vigilante fantasies to which we have become accustomed, putting both the slick, pretentious pandering of "Road to Perdition" and the earnest hand-wringing of "In the Bedroom" to shame.

Nothing about "The Son," which will be shown today and tomorrow at the New York Film Festival, is easy, and it has the balked, minimalist force (as well as the working-class setting) of one of Raymond Carver's better stories. It is hardly surprising that the Dardennes put together their naturalist fable with such a fanatical, self-effacing sense of craft. They are obsessed with work in the way that some of their European counterparts are obsessed with sex: the textures and rhythms of manual labor are, for them, at once irreducibly physical and saturated with an



almost spiritual significance.

Their previous film, "Rosetta," which won the top prize at Cannes in 1999, was about the killing of the spirit by factory work. "The Son" is a more hopeful (or at least a less depressing) film because its story is steeped in the disciplines of handcraft. Olivier's most notable trait is his honesty every time he tries to tell Magali a comforting, transparent lie, he looks almost physically ill, which is, in a way, a professional requirement. For a good carpenter, every measurement must be exact, every angle true.

Olivier is brusque with his students, but they trust him because they know he will always be objective and fair, judging them by their work and making them do it again until they get it right. That he treats Francis no differently from the rest is at once the surest sign of his integrity and, paradoxically, a form of deceit, and the film's deep and painful internal drama, as well as its nerve-wracking suspense, grows out of this contradiction.

The unblinking realism of "The Son" is itself a bit deceptive, since it turns out to be the raw material for a religious parable. The title is a giveaway, as is Olivier's profession, but rather than throwing around symbols, the Dardennes locate the possibility of grace in the rough textures and homely sounds of the world as it is. (Instead of a musical score, there is the whine of a power saw and the clatter of hammers). To call "The Son" a masterpiece would be to insult its modesty. Like the homely, useful boxes Olivier teaches his prodigals to build, it is sturdy, durable and, in its downcast, unobtrusive way, miraculous.

## THE SON

Written (in French, with English subtitles) and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne; director of photography, Alain Marcoen; edited by Marie Hélène Dozo; production designer, Igor Gabriel; produced by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne and Denis Freyd. Running time: 103 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Olivier Gourmet (Olivier), Morgan Marinne (Francis), Isabella Soupard (Magali), Rémy Renaud (Philippo), Nassim Hassaïni (Omar), Kevin Leroy (Raoul), Félicien Pitsaer (Steve), Annette Closset (Training Center Director), Fabian Marnette (Rino), Jimmy Deloof (Dany) and Anne Gérard (Dany's Mother).

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