



The Main Feature

Season 42 – Issue 9 – Screening 26 January 2023

Son of Saul (Saul fia)

Hungary 2015

107 mins. Certificate 15

Director	László Nemes
Screenplay	László Nemes and Clara Royer
Cinematography	Mátyás Erdély
Production Design	László Rajk

Cast

Saul Ausländer	Géza Röhrig
Abraham Warszawski	Levente Molnár
Oberkapo Biederman	Urs Rechn
Dr. Miklos Nyiszli	Sándor Zsótér
Oberscharführer Busch	Christian Harting
Saul's Son	Balázs Farkas/Gergő Farkas



Tonight's film marks Holocaust Memorial Day, held annually on 27th January. The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (<https://www.hmd.org.uk>) says:

[We] encourage remembrance in a world scarred by genocide. We promote and support Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) – the international day on 27 January to remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed under Nazi persecution of other groups and during more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

27 January marks the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp.

Together we bear witness for those who endured genocide, and honour the survivors and all those whose lives were changed beyond recognition.

Son of Saul is set in Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in October 1944, and follows a day-and-a-half in the life of Saul Ausländer, a Hungarian member of the 'Sonderkommando' or camp trustees. His job is to salvage valuables from the clothing of corpses, drag the dead (or 'pieces' as the Nazis call them) from the gas chambers into the ovens and scrub the 'showers' clean before the next group of victims arrives to be murdered. Members of the Sonderkommando would be regularly replaced, with the new members forced to deal with the bodies of their predecessors.

Saul works stoically, his haggard face betraying no emotion, numb from the daily atrocities. He sees a young boy barely alive after the gassing and subsequently suffocated by a Nazi doctor. He convinces himself that this is his son, and determines to grant him a proper Jewish burial. He manages to kidnap and hide his son's body. His search for a Rabbi is initially rebuffed but he inveigles himself into another Sonderkommando unit at the camp, eventually finding a man who claims to be a Rabbi amongst a new group of arrivals. Under cover of an armed rebellion by the Sonderkommando, he escapes the camp with the body, the Rabbi and several other inmates. There is a fleeting moment of hope for their future, soon dashed.



The film is the debut feature of László Nemes, and is based on 'The Scrolls of Auschwitz', a collection of testimonies by Sonderkommando members, underpinned by meticulous research (both the photo incident and revolt shown in the film are apparently rendered accurately).

During filming, the production team pledged to stick to a set of principles ('dogma') notably:

the film cannot look beautiful; the film cannot look appealing; we cannot make a horror film; staying with Saul means not going beyond his own field of

vision, hearing, or presence; and the camera is his companion, it stays with him throughout this hell. They succeeded.

A 40 mm lens and the academy aspect ratio of 1.375:1 were used to realise shallow focus and a portrait-like narrow field of vision. The outside scenes were shot only with natural light. With the camera 'hugging' Saul, background details are blurred (though the indistinct scenes in the gas chambers remain chillingly horrific).

The film was exceptionally well-received. Its rating on Rotten Tomatoes stands at 96% (from 233 critics) with a very positive 80% audience rating (from over 10,000 responses). It won the Grand Prix at Cannes, and the BAFTA, Golden Globe and Academy awards for Best Foreign Film.

In 2019, the Guardian's critics ranked it 12th in its Best Films of the 21st Century list (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/sep/13/100-best-films-movies-of-the-21st-century>) – in case you're wondering, "There Will be Blood" was placed first.

It is not an easy watch – unremittingly bleak but containing an astonishing performance from Géza Röhrig, a New York City-based Hungarian poet, who had not acted in film for over 25 years.

Final words to the Times' Kevin Maher: '[A] harrowing and hugely upsetting Oscar winner...a film that plunges you, shoulder height, into the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau during the final days of the war.... It's a tough film, and will make for a difficult night out at the cinema, but an absolutely essential one too.'

Eugene Smith



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The Greatest Films of All Time?

In 1952, *Sight and Sound* had the idea of asking critics to name the greatest films of all time. The process became decennial, with the 2022 edition being the largest ever, with 1,639 participating critics, programmers, curators, archivists and academics each submitting their top ten ballot. You can find the full list of 100 titles here: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news/revealed-results-2022-sight-sound-greatest-films-all-time-poll>. Here are the top thirty, in reverse order, with the thirteen titles which have been shown at the club in **bold**.

30	<i>Portrait of a Lady on Fire</i> (2019 France) Céline Sciamma
29	<i>Taxi Driver</i> (1976 USA) Martin Scorsese
28	<i>Daisies</i> (1966 Czechoslovakia) Věra Chytilová
27	<i>Shoah</i> (1985 France) Claude Lanzmann
25=	<i>Au hasard Balthazar</i> (1966 France, Sweden) Robert Bresson
25=	<i>Night of the Hunter</i> (1955 USA) Charles Laughton
24	<i>Do the Right Thing</i> (1989 USA) Spike Lee
23	<i>Playtime</i> (1967 France) Jacques Tati
21=	<i>Late Spring</i> (1949 Japan) Yasujiro Ozu
21=	<i>The Passion of Joan of Arc</i> (1927 France) Carl Th. Dreyer
20	<i>Seven Samurai</i> (1954 Japan) Akira Kurosawa
19	<i>Apocalypse Now</i> (1979 USA) Francis Ford Coppola
18	<i>Persona</i> (1966 Sweden) Ingmar Bergman
17	<i>Close-Up</i> (1989 Iran) Abbas Kiarostami
16	<i>Meshes of the Afternoon</i> (1943 USA) Maya Deren, Alexander Hammid
15	<i>The Searchers</i> (1956 USA) John Ford
14	<i>Cléo from 5 to 7</i> (1962 France, Italy) Agnès Varda
13	<i>La Règle du jeu</i> (1939 France) Jean Renoir
12	<i>The Godfather</i> (1972 USA) Francis Ford Coppola,
11	<i>Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans</i> (1927 USA) F W Murnau
10	<i>Singin' in the Rain</i> (1951 USA) Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen
9	<i>Man with a Movie Camera</i> (1929 USSR) Dziga Vertov
8	<i>Mulholland Dr.</i> (2001 France, USA) David Lynch
7	<i>Beau Travail</i> (1988 France) Claire Denis
6	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (1968 USA, UK) Stanley Kubrick
5	<i>In the Mood for Love</i> (2000 Hong Kong, France) Wong Kar Wai
4	<i>Tokyo Story</i> (1953 Japan) Yasujiro Ozu
3	<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941 USA) Orson Welles
2	<i>Vertigo</i> (1958 USA) Alfred Hitchcock
1	<i>Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles</i> (1975 Belgium, France) Chantal Akerman

Any list of this kind courts controversy and raises questions. Where are the 21st century films? Where are the comedies? And where are the musicals? All these genres are popular with audiences, but perhaps not with the critics. And there will be questions about methodology too. In 2012 the actual scores were published, but not in 2022. And whilst *Jeanne Deilman* may be a fine film, in the 2012 list it languished at 36th place. So why has it leaped to the top in 2022? There is a commentary by the *Guardian's* film critic here: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/dec/01/sight-and-sound-female-directed-greatest-film-of-all-time-chantal-akerman-jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles>.

Perhaps the real purpose of lists like this is to spur friendly discussion about why your own favourite film didn't make the cut, and – consequently – about whether film critics know what they're up to. And, of course, whether there are any titles you would like to see next season.

Michael Hipkins

Comments and reactions to: **Belfast**

No of reaction slips received = 27

Average score = 7.96

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	1	~	2	~	4	10	6	4

Terrible times!

Powerfully directed and so clearly personal to Branagh

Well-acted but too real, too upsetting

A very good film

A simplified view of the Troubles, which sometimes seemed almost incidental to the story

Boring at times and cringy! Not my cup of tea. Seen better

Good acting, cinematography, but somewhat spoiled by the subtitles

Very well presented on a difficult subject. Entertaining and humorous at times

Well worth watching. All the leading characters were so well cast, especially Buddy

A triumph for Branagh, both the writing and especially the direction, drawing out a first-class performance from Jude Hill

Great sound track

A wonderfully balanced film

Just a wonderful film!

Harsh criticism from Max Hastings and the note writer – this is not presented as a documentary.

There is a family story and humour. A boy's view. Extraordinary acting and very moving

Excellent, and the young boy was brilliant. A sad reminder of the times there, though

Position	Film	Average score
1	Belfast	7.96
2	The Duke	7.75
3	Seven Chances	7.61
4	Mandela and de Klerk	7.47
5	After Love	7.36
6	Flee	6.79
7	Day for Night	6.57
8	Guardians of the Galaxy	5.53
9	L'Eclisse	3.00

Forthcoming attraction: 9 February 2023 – **The Band Wagon**



[T]he whole point about *The Band Wagon*, and one which sometimes makes people underrate it, was the way everything seems to mesh so seamlessly - almost effortlessly, in fact. That was due to Minnelli, whose flair and imagination, admittedly aided by the huge array of MGM talent both behind and in front of the cameras, was matched by his almost perfect control. Watching the best Minnelli films now, we are inclined to take this control for granted, as if he just had to throw the whole thing together with the appropriate craftsmanship and energy to keep us amused. But Minnelli's work was as precise as Astaire's, and that's

what made him a great director. 'If you want to do a musical, it requires as much preparation as *Hamlet*', he once said. Derek Malcolm, *The Guardian*