



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

THE SON (15)

Director: Florian Zeller

Starring: Hugh Jackman, Laura Dern, Vanessa Kirby, Zen McGrath, Anthony Hopkins
UK, 2022, 2 hours 3 minutes

Florian Zeller devastated audiences in 2020 with his movie, *The Father*, based on his own stage play and adapted by Christopher Hampton. Maybe the title of Zeller's new film, *The Son* – again from his own play with a Hampton screenplay – provides a kind of emotional rhyme or complement to that.

The Son is a laceratingly painful drama, an incrementally increasing agony without anaesthetic. At the centre of it, Hugh Jackman gives a performance of great dignity, presence and intelligence as Peter, a prosperous New York lawyer. But then his first wife gets in touch saying that his 17-year-old son by their relationship is deeply depressed, playing truant from school and begging to stay with him for a while. Peter decides he can't honourably refuse. Vanessa Kirby plays Peter's new wife Beth; Laura Dern is his first wife Kate; Anthony Hopkins has a cameo as Peter's formidably angry father and the young Australian actor Zen McGrath is Peter's troubled son Nicholas.

Watching *The Son* means uneasily pondering possible influences, such as Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, or Philip Larkin's *This Be the Verse*, or indeed Anton Chekhov's dictum about what happens when a certain object is produced in act one. But there is something distinctively Hellerian in its pessimism. Peter accepts Nicholas into his now crowded home because it is the right thing to do, but also because at one level he wants to rebuke his own cold and uncaring and irresponsible father – and in fact engineers an unannounced visit to the old man, clearly just so he can tell him what is happening with Nicholas and then use that as a pretext to dredge up the past. Dern shows how Kate herself is over their breakup only in the sense she is able to accept it rationally, but if anything has a clearer sense of her grievances – and is perhaps not entirely displeased that young Nicholas could now damage or even destroy Peter's remarriage. Kirby shows her candid fear of Nicholas – who is sometimes charming, sometimes unsettling – and Nicholas himself is candidly angry about the way his father abandoned him (as he sees it), but his attitude is different; he wants something in return for a ruined past.

But what? Does he want to bring them back together: if so, it seems to be working, in its way, but at what cost? Or is he simply transfixed and horrified? Or is he just psychologically disturbed in ways that do not admit of analysis?

At a level deeper than this, I think *The Son* is about the middle-aged generation's fear of and incomprehension of the young. Peter looks into Nicholas's face – sometimes smiling, sometimes crying, sometimes eerily blank – and can see nothing there that tells him the truth about what his son is thinking and feeling and what he should be thinking and feeling in return. **Peter Bradshaw – (THE GUARDIAN)**

Notes compiled by Rachel Lambert