

'A Son' is a powerful family tragedy will long be remembered



VENICE: Arab cinema has touched the skies in the past five years or so, and the region's film directors have learnt how to tell a story in a wonderfully focused way and in the shortest possible time.

Mehdi M. Barsaoui's debut feature at the Venice Film Festival, "A Son," at 96 minutes is a crisp look at a family in turmoil.

Set in the summer of 2011, six months after the Jasmine Revolution and the fall of Tunisian president, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, but before the death of the former Libyan leader, Muammar Qaddafi, the movie profiles a family picnic in southern Tunisia.

It is all sunshine and joy with well-educated Fares (Sami Bouajila), his wife Meriem (Najla Ben Abdallah), and their 11-year-old son, Aziz (Youssef Khemiri), out for a weekend with friends in the scenic city of Tataouine.

But during the family trio's drive back home tragedy strikes when militant rebels attack Fares' car, and although he manages to turn it around and speed away, a bullet hits the young boy.

Later, in hospital, a doctor tells the couple that Aziz's liver has been pierced and he will need a transplant. The parents are asked to undergo liver donor tests, but the results reveal information that threatens to destroy the family.

"A Son" has a climax that is unforgettable, and performances that are nothing short of brilliant. If Bouajila conveys his anger, angst and wounded pride in an extraordinarily controlled way, Abdallah portrays the pain of guilt and sorrow with subtle ease and fortitude.

Powerfully penned and directed with finesse, "A Son" should have qualified for the main competition, particularly since it delves into the seedy world of organ trade – and how this pushes people in dire medical emergencies to resort to the most scandalous and unlawful of activities.

With minimal background score – which heightens the effect of silence and the anguish the parents have to go through – and a camera that respects privacy without being curiously intrusive, Barsaoui's film turns out to be a winner, and a work that will be remembered long after the festival has drawn its curtains.
