

# Review: 'The Son' at the Venice Film Festival is powerful and award worthy



VENICE: One of the most gripping offerings at the 79th edition of the Venice Film Festival, “The Son” underlines in bold the importance of the relationship between children and their parents.



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The immensely gifted French playwright Florian Zeller’s trilogy on mental health issues ends with “The Son,” following the hugely successful “The Mother” and “The Father,” for which lead star Anthony Hopkins walked away with an Oscar in 2021.

He appears again in “The Son,” but it is more of a cameo appearance even though his name appears at the top of the credits. It is, however, a superb cameo.

“The Son” deals with a teenager experiencing suicidal thoughts. In the film, he focuses his camera on 17-year-old New Yorker Nicholas (a memorable performance by newcomer Zen McGrath).

“I am in pain. All the time,” he declares in a pained cry for help that will resonate with viewers long after the credits roll.

One night, Nicolas’s mother, Kate (Laura Dern), walks into her ex-husband, Peter’s (Hugh Jackman) home to say “he scares me.” Peter is a big shot planning to enter politics, but takes time off from work and his present wife, Beth (Vanessa Kirby), and their new-born child to talk to Nicolas, who insists he would like to live with his dad.

The father has no clue what needs to be done, which is not uncommon for family members dealing with teenagers with depression. This uncertainty infuses the movie with a disturbing feeling. You know what could happen, and yet are not sure how to prevent it. The viewer becomes as torn as the teenager’s parents over whether to follow the doctor’s advice or Nicolas’s emotional plea to take him out of the psychiatric hospital.

A workaholic, Peter is desperately trying to be a good father, fighting off his experience with his own father (Hopkins), and there is a telling and terse confrontation between the two when the older man says “it was 40 years ago, get over it and move on.” It is a powerful commentary on the role of fathers in the household — a relationship that is only recently being explored on the big screen.

The sets have been deliberately scaled down and the ambient noise of New York is toned down, perhaps to ensure our attention remains laser focused on the core of the narrative. Zeller wants audiences to think about how mentally ill the world is today — in a state of intense anxiety — something that has been accentuated by the pandemic. Jackman’s excellent performance as a man thoroughly perplexed helps push the plot, and the dialogue imaginatively adapted into English from the original French play by Christopher Hampton makes “The Son” a worthy contender for the Golden Lion award in Venice — and possibly even the Academy Awards.

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