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Custody (15)

dir: **Xavier Legrand**

Starring: **Denis Ménochet, Léa Drucker, Thomas Gloria**

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Synopsis: France, present day. Miriam and her ex-husband Antoine attend a custody hearing, to determine his access rights to their children, especially 12 year-old Julien. In spite of Miriam's concerns about Antoine's violent behaviour towards her, the judge awards Antoine weekend access. Antoine does not know where Miriam is living and tries to pressurise Julien into disclosing the information. Julien resists. A chance remark leads to Antoine discovering the address and he barges into Miriam's home one day. He is angry but shows contrition. Miriam remains anxious about his behaviour. Later, as she prepares for her older daughter's 18th birthday party, Antoine arrives and makes a scene, before storming off. Later, he returns to their flat, armed. The alarm is raised. Miriam and Julien take refuge in the bathroom. The police arrive and arrest Antoine.

There's an illuminating moment in this post-divorce family drama that spotlights how an otherwise familiar tale of domestic discord can ramp up anxiety levels to near-cardiac intensity. It's a nuance in the subtitling, but telling for all that. Julien, a seemingly shy 12 year old, refers somewhat scathingly to his dad Antoine - now divorced from the boy's mother, in acrimonious circumstances - calling him, in the English translation, "that man." No love lost there, and the scorn certainly comes across. But what Julien is actually saying in French is so much more unsettling: he calls Antoine "*l'autre*" - the other. It's a term that gets to the nub of the film's sheer visceral power, as we gradually realise that the estranged family are living in abject fear of this man. In their eyes, he is indeed "the other" because they just don't know what his next move might be. Normal rational parameters don't apply here, and the result is a creeping dread that insidiously affects their every waking hour, getting to the viewer as well. While Antoine is increasingly consumed with rage at the wife and kids he feels have betrayed him, their attempt to begin a new chapter of their lives faces a potentially violent confrontation.

Those who caught Xavier Legrand's previous Oscar-nominated and César winning 2013 short *Just Before Losing Everything* will be expecting as much already. That half-hour vignette featured the same leads, Léa Drucker and Denis Ménochet, in the same roles at an earlier moment in their troubled lives, the day when the wife and kids engineered their escape. For all the short's qualities of vivid precision, it's fair to say that *Custody* works better if you're coming to it fresh. The opening family court hearing, for instance, lays out both sides of the post-divorce argument over access to Julien, putting us in the same position as the judge. Do we believe Miriam's claims of harassment and cut Antoine off entirely? Or pay heed to his claim that he has a paternal right to see his son? In the event,



the Dad gets weekend visitation but it soon becomes apparent that the whole situation is a ticking time bomb. Antoine is to collect Julien from his maternal grandparents' place, remaining in the dark as to where Miriam and the kids are now living. But they can't make a fresh start while they're paralysed by fear that he'll track them down, which sets up the prospect that this naturalistic, almost documentary-style record of post divorce process might suddenly flip into a home-invasion thriller.

Legrand's treatment seems to exist at the other end of the stylistic spectrum from button-pushing genre fare, since there's no tension-massaging score, and he likes to let scenes run on within the frame rather than pointing things up with insistent close-in cutting. What he does is to build a cumulative sense of credibility that makes the impact even more potent when the needle finally slips into the red, with the performances absolutely key in this. Ménochet's barrel chested physicality carries an implicit threat, yet the more we see of his emotional volatility - tensile with rage one minute, appearing little-boy lost the next - the more we come to share the family's anxiety at his unpredictable potential for wreaking havoc. The stand-out though, is Thomas Gloria as the much put upon Julien, who has very little to say to his dad but knows he's under heavy pressure to reveal the location of the family's new flat. The look of rising panic on his face as Legrand keeps him in the frame for the course of a car journey is a scene of horrifying authenticity - perhaps facilitated by Legrand's own past experience as a child actor in the likes of Louis Malle's *Au revoir Les Enfants* (1987).

What we're seeing is, hopefully, a reflection of the adolescent's rejection of his father's command-and-control version of masculinity (as also seen in the brusque, dictatorial behaviour of Antoine's own elderly papa), which gives the narrative a bit more texture than a mere bogeyman scare story, undeniably effective though that is in that regard. Some might feel that the climactic confrontation cleaves a little too close to formulate expectations, but Legrand shows remarkable control in moving up through the gears. Most impressive is the effectively choreographed 18th birthday party for the older sister, where the music's too loud for the church-hall venue, the place is rammed and while a good time's being had by nearly all, Legrand has the viewer nervously scanning the edge of the frame in case "*l'autre*" should make his fateful appearance. Heart-stopping stuff, and a truly auspicious debut.

Please see over for credits

Credits

Antoine Besson	Denis Ménochet
Miriam Besson	Léa Drucker
Julien Besson	Thomas Gloria
Josephine Besson	Mathilde Auneveux
Samuel	Mathieu Saikaly
Judge	Saadia Bentaleb
Miriam's lawyer	Sophia Pincemaille
Clerk	Coralie Russier
Antoine's lawyer	Emilie Incerti-Formentini
Sylvia	Florence Janas
Emergency services operator	Jêrome Care Aulanier
Cyril	Julien Lucas
Resident	Jenny Bellay
Madeleine	Martine Vandeville
Joël	Jean-Marie Winling
Nanny, grandmother	Martine Schambacher
André	Jean-Claude Leguay
Director	Xavier Legrand
Screenplay	Xavier Legrand
Director of Photography	Nathalie Durand
Editor	Yorgos Lamprinos
Sound	Julien Sicart, Julien Roig, Vincent Verdoux
Costume	Laurence Forgue
Production design	Jérémie Sfez

France 2016. 93 mins

Another View

This poisonous little debut feature from French director Xavier Legrand is a long-fanged genre piece kitted out in sheep's clothing. Its opening act offers a fan dance of subtle misdirection and teasing obfuscation, as a warring couple engage in a bitter custody battle overseen by a harried magistrate. In the red corner, there's Léa Drucker's cowering fawn Miriam, who wants nothing more than to be rid of her allegedly vile and overbearing husband.

Unfortunately for her, she doesn't quite have the courage to just say these words in a room full of lawyers. In the blue corner, there's seething man-hulk Antoine (Denis Ménochet), who resembles a melancholic, gone-to-seed prizefighter. His tiny, piercing eyes and petit facial features serve to cloak any outward emotion, making it even tougher, initially, to know whose side to take.

Despite statements from his children that they no longer want to spend time with him and various accusations of abuse, Antoine calls conspiracy and claims that Miriam is a master manipulator who has turned his brood against him. Even though the case seems to be weighted heavily in Miriam's favour, the judge inexplicably awards a grateful Antoine weekend visiting rights. As that extended prologue comes to an abrupt, almost business-like close, everything is laid bare.

Custody is a direct sequel to Legrand's 2013 short, *Just Before Losing Everything*, which charts Miriam's initial attempts to break free from her quasi-psychotic spouse. While there's some initial ambiguity in a film about which parent we should be rooting for as objective observers, the ball drops fairly swiftly when it's revealed that Antoine is, in fact, an obsessive psychopath of the Jack Torrance variety, and sundry carnage ensues. Any sense that the film is interested in dealing with the emotional shades of grey that come from domestic disputes is tossed aside for some nicely executed stalk-and-slash business as Antoine loses his shit in a very public way.

Where the film delivers on the thrills front, it doesn't appear to offer much insight into the untangling of a relationship or how children's lives are negatively affected by the actions of a hostile parent. Where Legrand excels is in the way he deals with space and the physical distance between characters. Just as in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, where you always have a sense of the protagonists' presence, both on and off screen, the same goes here when Antoine begins chasing his terrified young son across a housing estate before backing down and retreating to his car.

As you witness the extent of Antoine's mania, it becomes harder to believe that a judge would have originally allowed him even limited access to children, but maybe that's the point. Humans – not just extremely violent men – can pull down a cloaking device which hides their inner rage, and no judge in the land can see through it at the vital moment. This is an impressive first film, and it will be interesting to see if Legrand's path takes him towards more cut-and-dried horror, or the chin-strokey, cynical social realist art movie at which directors like Michael Haneke excel.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday February 8th, 7.30pm *Wajib* (Palestine 2018. Cert 15)

One of the pleasures of programming for the Society is the finding and bringing new and surprising cinema to our members. So it is with *Wajib*, which fills the second of our new release slots. Director Annemarie Jacir's film is set in Nazareth and follows father and son Abu and Shadi (played by real-life father and son Mohammad and Saleh Bakri) as they travel round the town together delivering invitations to a family member's wedding, as is the custom. The film explores the father/son changing relationship in touching, delicately observed way, providing wry humour along with many insights into a country too often in the news for other reasons.