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Foxtrot (15)

Dir: Samuel Maoz

Starring: Lior Ashkenazi, Sarah Adler, Yonatan Shiray

Sponsor: Andrew Howard

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Synopsis: Present day Tel Aviv. Israeli soldiers arrive at the apartment of Michael and Dafna Feldmann to tell them their conscript son Jonathan has died "in the line of duty". The family is shocked. Michael tries to contact Jonathan's sister and goes to tell his mother. When a lieutenant arrives to make arrangements for the funeral, Michael asks to see Jonathan's body but is refused. Jonathan's sister Alma arrives to console Michael. Soldiers return to tell them it's a case of mistaken identity. Michael tries to get his son sent home. At Checkpoint Foxtrot, on Israel's northern border, Jonathan and 3 fellow conscripts try to avoid boredom in different ways including aggravating Palestinian travellers. One night, a car arrives with 4 Palestinian occupants. A beer can falls from the car and, mistaking it for a grenade, Jonathan shoots the occupants. An officer arrives and covers up the incident. Jonathan is sent home. A flashback reveals a road accident on the journey. Michael and Dafna are shown coming to terms with the news.

In June 1982, Samuel Maoz, then 20 years old, found himself called up for active service. Israel was invading Lebanon and Maoz, trained as a gunner, was assigned to a tank crew. During the conflict, he sustained only minor injuries and returned home, where his mother embraced him, weeping and thanking God that her son was safe and sound. "She did not realise", Maoz later recalled, "that I did not come home safe and sound. In fact, I did not come home at all. She had no idea that her son had died in Lebanon and that she was now embracing an empty shell."

It took 25 years for Maoz to face the horror of his memories and turn them into a script that became *Lebanon* (2009), his first feature as writer-director. That film, which picked up the Golden Lion at Venice, plays out almost entirely within the claustrophobic sweatbox of a tank; four young men crammed in together, deafened by relentless noise, desperately [peering through the gunsight to work out where they are, where they should be going, where the next danger is coming from. No heroics, no glory - this is war as fear and stench and panic.

Now, 8 years on, comes *Foxtrot* - Maoz's even darker more despairingly disillusioned view of Israel's long-running conflict. The film was awarded a Grand Jury Prize in Venice along with a stack of other awards, many of them from the Israeli film Academy. Yet it's been vociferously denounced by the Israeli Minister of Culture, Miri Regev, who accused Maoz of treason and "cooperating with the anti-Israel narrative". At the same time the film has been criticised on the left for not taking a strong enough stand against the army. Maoz has responded: "I'm not trying to judge my culture but to understand it."



Like *Lebanon*, *Foxtrot* was sparked by personal trauma. Some twenty years ago, Maoz refused to give his eldest daughter money for a cab when she was running late for school, telling her to take the bus instead. Soon after she left, news came that the bus had been targeted by a bomb. For an agonized hour Maoz believed he had sent his daughter to her death, until he heard that she had missed the bus. From this searing experience of tragedy narrowly averted came the plot of *Foxtrot* - only with the addition of a fatal twist.

The action falls into the classic three act pattern, each act largely confined to a single location; the first and third to the Tel Aviv apartment of Michael Feldmann (Lior Ashkenazi) and his wife Dafna (Sarah Adler,) the middle act to the isolated Checkpoint Foxtrot on Israel's northern border with the Palestinian territories where their son Jonathan (Yonatan Shiray) is stationed along with three comrades - all conscripts, barely out of their teens. The mood of the framing sections is angry and brooding, verging on elegiac; that of the middle section, the longest, laces sardonic humour with absurdity, before plunging into disaster and death. The echoes of *Lebanon* in this section are unmistakable; once again we have four young conscripts shoved into a meaningless conflict. "What are we fighting for here?" they ask each other. "What's the purpose?"

It's this middle section, with its abrupt mood switches, that has attracted the brunt of official criticism; yet at times it's almost light-hearted. The mind-numbing tedium of the posting; the flimsy checkpoint barrier creakily raised to allow a solitary, supercilious camel to pass; a can timed as it rolls across the floor of the shipping container housing the lads to see how much further each night the container has sunk lopsidedly into the mud; the listening post anomalously housed in a faded ice cream van adorned with a smiling Monroe-esque blonde; above all the crazily spirited rendition by one of the Script (Etay Axelrod) partnered by his machine gun, of the dance the checkpoint is named for; all this makes the outburst of panicky, brutal slaughter, when it comes, even more shocking.

A foxtrot, we are reminded, brings the dancer back to the point where he started. Maoz's film effectively does this to Michael, who starts and ends in a state of grief-stricken near-stasis, his anguish exacerbated in the final act by knowing that he himself had unwittingly brought about the very fate that he most dreaded. Ashkenazi gives a performance of terrifyingly glazed numbness. In him, Maoz seems to personify the agonizing moral contradictions and entanglements that continue to torment the state of Israel. The great Israeli humanist Amos Oz, who died in the final days of 2018, once observed that "societies immersed in conflict tend to become

more racist, intolerant and unforgiving...I love Israel, but I don't like it very much." The director of *Foxtrot*, one suspects might well agree.

Credits

Michael Feldmann	Lior Ashkenazi
Dafna Feldmann	Sarah Adler
Jonathan	Yonatan Shiray
Dancing soldier	Etay Axelroad
Soldier with headphones	Shaul Amir
Soldier rolling cans	Dekel Adin
Squad Commander	Gefen Barkai
Michael's mother	Karen Ugowski
Alma	Shira Haas
Avigdor, Michael's brother	Yehuda Almagor
Officer	Arie Tcherner
Religion officer	Itamar Rotschild
Military M.D.	Roi Miller
Official military officer	Danny Isserless
Director	Samuel Maoz
Screenplay	Samuel Maoz
Cinematography	Giora Bejach
Editing	Guy Nemesh, Arik Lahav
Score	Leibovich
Sound/music direction	Amit Poznansky
Production design	Alex Claude
Costume design	Arad Sawat
	Hila Bargiel
	Israel /France/Germany 2017
	113 mins

Another View

There's a kind of performative anxiety that comes when a film director who is lauded by festivals and awards bodies decides to slink back into the realms of relative anonymity rather than crack out a quickie follow-up to capitalise on any residual success and brand awareness.

Israeli writer/director Samuel Maoz won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival way, way back in 2009 for his debut feature, *Lebanon*, a film whose neat gimmick was that it was set entirely within the belly of a tank. We've had an additional two year wait for that second film, as *Foxtrot* premiered in Venice in 2017.

The wait has been worth it, but maybe the occasion feels a little less celebratory than it should. Maoz's new feature is a pristinely sculpted tale of familial desolation with the folly of modern warfare lurking in the background.

Initially, it plays like a claustrophobic horror film where the portentous stench of death hangs in the air. From its very first frames, there's the sense that this is a film that has been laboured over, thought through and refined down to its purest essence. Maoz manages to make the drab domestic setting of a harried architect and his wife appear almost as a futurist palace. Every camera placing is designed to either nudge some subtle visual symbolism to the fore, or else house some evocative, painterly flourish.

And maybe that's a problem: this feels like a work where someone has spent so long thinking about the details that the bigger picture has been lost and an irritating flaw is the one thing that sticks in the memory as the credits roll. It is the story of a couple who are told that their son has been killed in the line of duty – manning a checkpoint on the Israel/Palestine border. Suddenly his vacant bedroom becomes a shrine for innocence lost. The authorities, however, are mincing their words and fudging their story – it's as if they're inventing a cosy narrative as a way to dilute the horrid facts.

The film's more entertaining (but no-less bleak) second half flashes back to the son, Jonathan, and his three young, antsy cohorts out in the dessert, sleeping in a shipping crate that's sinking into a bog and eating lots and lots of rancid canned meat. Theirs is a life of boredom and servitude, made bearable only because they're allowed to carry guns and are made to think that they're vital cogs within a hulking piece of geopolitical machinery.

Their drudgery and isolation ends up making their fear more obvious – when cars trundle down this road, their anxiety and lack of worldliness leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the most simple processes, even while presenting a veneer of militaristic authority.

It's a strange film, impressive as a piece of finely-wrought craft which brims with caustic emotion. It even works as an enraged screed about political corruption at the core of a dirty war in which human life has less than no value. Everything is so minutely calibrated that, when we arrive at the film's glib punchline (and it's a punchline rather than a conclusion), you feel that Maoz has undersold his aims in search of ironic bathos rather than something more meaningful and impactful.

It's a bit of a wash out, and undoes lots of the good work that precedes it. Even so, Maoz definitely knows how to knock a film together, so fingers crossed that the window between this and his next one is a lot more narrow.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday, January 24th. 7.30pm An Imperfect Age (Italy 2017. Cert tbc)

We are so used to presenting films by directors who have already made their mark, that to be able to show something from a director at the very start of their career should make an intriguing change. *An Imperfect Age* - not so much low-budget as micro budget - was screened at last year's Indie Lincs festival. It tells the story of 2 teenage friends preparing to audition for a place in a prestigious ballet school. When shy, reserved Sara is enticed to a party by the more free-spirited Camilla, the consequences for them both turn out to be more devastating than either could have imagined. For a first feature *An Imperfect Age* presents a truthful story well told.

This year's Indie Lincs festival runs from February 14-16, at the LPAC. For more information visit www.indie-lincs.com

The new release film for February 21st is *Rojo* (Argentina, 2018, Cert 15). Released in September last year, Benjamin Naishtat's menacing film is set on the eve of the military coup in 1976 and uses one man's disappearance to uncover the moral malaise infecting the middle classes, and the victims of their callous disregard.