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Mother and Son (12a)

Dir: Léonor Serraille

with: Annabelle Lengronne, Stéphane Bak, Kenzo Sambin

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Synopsis: France, the recent past and present. The film is in three parts. In the first we meet Rose, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast, takes a job working as a room maid in a hotel. We learn of her qualities as a mother and the challenges she faces caring for her two sons. In the second, we see the story from the point of view of her oldest son as he grows from young adolescence towards adulthood. In the third part, we see her younger son's story.

Léonor Serraille's second feature film, the tender and moving *Mother and Son* (more aptly titled *Un petit frère* in French) focuses on a family of Ivorian immigrants in France over the course of 20-odd years. Rose, the mother—played with arresting dynamism and resourcefulness by Annabelle Lengronne—is still young and has a rebellious streak, leading her to squabble with the relatives hosting her and her young sons, Jean and Ernest, and to reject a highly suitable romantic prospect, the amusingly named Jules César. When Rose, who has taken a job working as a room maid in a hotel, embarks on an affair with a married man, she moves Jean and Ernest to Rouen with her, leaving Jean to look after his younger brother during the week and returning from the capital at weekends. Here, the future that Rose has been so careful to carve out for her sons, and the family bond they share, based on impeccable manners and unquestioning hard work, look set to implode.

The film is essentially divided into three character-based chapters, with Rose leading the film's first section, followed by Jean, as he grows from a little boy at the beginning to a teenager in Rouen, and finally Ernest. Rose's segment at the start of the film is perhaps the most successful of the three: we are offered a remarkably rich portrait of this confused and stubborn young woman, who is constitutionally unable to abide by any of the rules that she sets out for her sons ("Never cry", for instance). Rose's ready intelligence and sexual freedom put her at odds with her surroundings; we thrill to her energy, and yet we see what a poor example she sets for her children, even while being a fine parent in other regards. The nuanced script sets Rose up for a journey into ever more obstinacy, showing how she cannot be a master of her own fate, and how the consequences of her decisions will ripple through the years.



Serraille's writing in this opening section, as elsewhere in this film, is exemplary. In her debut, *Jeune Femme*, the writer-director had shown a keen eye for comedy of manners with attitude and a barking wit; here, she adds a great gentleness of vision to those qualities. *Mother and Son* has some very funny moments (foremost, an extraordinary sequence in which Rose attends a work day hosted by the idiotic white owner of the chain of hotels that employs her, which ends in hilariously debauched fashion), but these are always leavened by a fairly mild and loving worldview, devoid of judgement. Rather, Serraille placidly lays out her story, only really showing anger in a sequence in Ernest's segment when, as a young man, he is racially profiled by police officers.

Jean's segment—led by Stéphane Bak, rather touching as the tentative, do-good older brother—sees the teenager gradually fighting back against the pressure and expectations placed on him by Rose. There is perhaps a little more recourse on Serraille's part to drama in this chapter, but the clear-sighted viewpoint remains; she is abetted in this by fine, unshowy lensing by Hélène Louvart, who nevertheless lets rip in a stunning sequence in which Jean, the erstwhile good boy, surrenders to a more animal side while dancing in a nightclub. Filmed in a spellbinding long take drenched in hot neon blues, Bak gyrates feverishly, signifying his character's painful transition.

Ernest's chapter picks up the slack, following the oddly innocent younger brother in his charmed, somehow protected existence: things are easier for him, as they are for all younger siblings, making this last section perhaps a touch less powerful. Nevertheless, Serraille's gift for observation is most evident here, producing stretches of immense charm, or—as when Ernest reconnects with Rose—of great sorrow.

Mother and Son is a deceptively simple family fresco, told with a fairly novelistic classicism. But within this framework, Serraille seems to tell a more complete story of France, one that includes its immigration. She manages to pierce right to the heart of these lives (since she herself is white, not a given). There is a deeply lovable looseness here in Serraille's writing and tone, evident in the natural performances she coaxes from her cast, and the bursts of wit in her dialogue gild and offset what could otherwise be a story of truly unbearable poignancy. The film closes on a dedication, to a certain Pacôme—a loved one whose

lived experience, you feel, must have closely informed this strikingly detailed generational drama.

Credits

Rose	Annabelle Lengronne
Jean (at 19)	Stéphane Bak
Ernest (at 13)	Kenzo Sambin
Ernest (adult)	Ahmed Syll
Jean (at 10)	Sidy Fofana
Ernest (at 5)	Milan Ducansi
Eugénie	Audrey Kouakou
Félicien	Etienne Minoungou
Jules César	Jean-Christophe Folly
Malik	Majd Mastoura
Marsac	Pascal Rénéric
Thierry	Thibaut Evrard
Camille	Angelina Woreth
Sonia	Manon Clavel
Anna	Laetitia Dosch
Director	Léonor Serraille
Screenplay	Léonor Serraille
Cinematography	Hélène Louvart
Editing	Clémence Carré
	France 2022. 117 mins

Another view

Léonor Serraille loves headstrong, emotional women. The French director burst onto the Cannes scene when, in 2017, she won the Camera d'Or (the prize for the best first feature) with her debut, *Jeune Femme*, starring Laetitia Dosch as a newly single redhead spreading chaos across Paris.

This time, the charming whirlwind at the core is Annabelle Lengronne's Rose, a single mother who arrives in Paris from the Ivory Coast in 1989 with two small boys under her arm and other sons left behind at home. Unlike the cautious relatives who offers the trio a temporary home, Rose is instantly open to the thrills available to the beautiful and vivacious woman she is, and, when not working as a hotel cleaner, she enjoys an abundant sex life.

Mother and Son has a novelistic scope, with an opening voice-over from Rose's youngest son, Ernest, creating a portent of the trials to come for this immigrant family. He is five when the film opens and 25 by the time the curtain falls. Their fortunes are dependent on the men drawn to Rose, hence the move from Paris to Rouen in the wake of a rich white man taking an interest. From this point, focus switches from the charismatic Legronne captured in a frenetic shooting style, to the boys, ten years later, as they attempt to look after themselves, for Rose lives in Paris during the week so as to continue working.

There are shades of the 1937 Barbara Stanwyck tearjerker, *Stella Dallas*, to Rose's desire for her children to make good irrespective of what happens to her. Lengronne's gutsy emotional performance weathers twenty years, doing layered work as she puts her strongest side forward for her kids. In one captivating scene, Jean spies on her as she goes from dancing alone, drinking a beer and smoking, to breaking down in tears. The precise nature of her sorrow is left obscure, as the camera stays aligned to the perspective of her watching child.

Intensity diminishes as the focus switches to the brothers for chapters titled 'Jean' and 'Ernest'. We watch as older brother Jean transforms from a promising A-student with dreams of becoming a pilot to a reckless teen, confused about his place in the world. The complexity of coming-of-age as a Black teenager with no father and an erratic mother are implied to be the reason for Jean's spiral. However the film favours vague allusion rather than raw specificity

and strays into familiar angry young man terrain, despite a committed performance by Stéphane Bak.

Ernest is forged by bearing witness to the follies of his mother and brother. The final chapter finds him as a 25-year-old philosophy teacher (Ahmed Sylla), seemingly an immigrant success story. Rose visits him for a lengthy two-hander that lays bare the heartache and cost of "making it" in a country that has defeated one's nearest and dearest. Yet the writing cannot match the poignancy of Lengronne's performance. Her emotional immediacy is more interesting than the epic, yet comparatively muted scope of the film.

Sophie Monks Kaufman: Little White Lies

Our Next Screening

Friday March 8th: 7.30pm

Afire (Germany 2022. 12)

Friends Felix and Leon are surprised to find, on arriving at Felix's family's holiday cottage on the German Baltic coast, that they are not alone. A young woman, Nadja and boyfriend Devid are also guests there. This does not please Leon, a writer who has come to the cottage for the peace and quiet needed to complete his second novel. In fact nothing much pleases Leon who tends to take himself far too seriously. Although he finds the spirited Nadja attractive he cannot help but disapprove of her. Not so Felix, more cheerful and open-minded, who willingly makes friends with Nadja and Devid. We are set for a barbed tragi-comic tale of friendship and romance, bristling with sexual tension. And all along there lurks the threat of an encroaching forest fire.

Janet Dobson

We're sad to report news of the death on February 15 of Janet Dobson, at the age of 87. Janet was a stalwart of the Society for many, many years, as booking secretary and then, after her husband Gerry died in 2000, as temporary chair. She hosted many a committee meeting at her home in Burton village and was a regular at our screenings, even joining us during her visits to Lincoln after her move to Chichester (to be nearer to her family).

She is survived by her two children, Sarah and Julian. Funeral arrangements have yet to be confirmed but expressions of condolence can be sent to them, c/o Littlewood Farm, Singleton, Chichester, West Sussex PO180HJ