



74th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin

Competition

AFTER 'THE GUILTY'

SONS

A FILM BY GUSTAV MÖLLER

NORDISK FILM PRODUCTION
presents



SIDSE BABETT KNUDSEN

SEBASTIAN BULL DAR SALIM MARINA BOURAS OLAF JOHANNESSEN

SONS

A FILM BY
GUSTAV MÖLLER

Denmark, Sweden • 2024 • Color • 100 Mins • 4K • 1.37 • Dolby Atmos

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Eva, an idealistic prison officer, is faced with the dilemma of her life when a young man from her past gets transferred to the prison where she works. Without revealing her secret, Eva asks to be moved to the young man's ward - the toughest and most violent in the prison. Here begins an unsettling psychological thriller, where Eva's sense of justice puts both her morality and future at stake.



INTERVIEW WITH GUSTAV MÖLLER

*/ After **The Guilty**, which had a police emergency call center as its unique setting, you explore another confined world: a prison which we almost never leave. What was the starting point of **Sons**?*

A long running fascination with prisons, for sure. First of all, I find prisons to be a very strong cinematic arena. You have all these extreme characters, clear-cut rules and strong power dynamics. On top of that, the location itself is packed with symbolism and archetypes. The prison is basically a very strong canvas to tell stories, but at the same time, a lot of the stories told are very similar. I saw an opportunity to tell a different story, from a different perspective. Secondly, if we zoom out, each prison holds a mirror to the society that built it. I find that in Denmark - as well as in most of Europe actually.. We have not yet decided what we want our

prisons to be, and by extension, who we want to be as a people. Are we rational or emotional creatures? Do we believe in forgiveness and rehabilitation? Or do we prefer revenge and punishment? Right now, the criminal justice system tries to cater to both sides, even though they are directly contradicting each other. I find that paradox super fascinating, and that is the main conflict I wanted to explore.

/ What kind of research did you do?

I did a quite extensive research with my co-writer, Emil Nygaard Albertsen, visiting different prisons, speaking with inmates, officers, prison priests, psychiatrists, legal experts, victims of crime, all sides of the subject really. Since the main character of the film is a prison officer, the most focal point of the research was of course from that perspective. Martin Sørensen is an ex



prison officer, that quickly became a consultant on the film and also plays a small part on screen. Our conversations with Martin started three years before the shooting, and through him we got a first hand insight into both the practical and psychological aspects of the job.

/ How did you approach the genre of prison film, which is pretty codified?

I love when a genre brings strong codes, rules and archetypes, and the prison genre definitely does just that. Having strong archetypes, or clichés even, in your genre, allows you to play with, and subvert the audiences expectations. Making the film, we always talked about *Sons* as a “reversed prison film”. Our main character, the prison officer, is in a lot of ways the opposite of the classic protagonist: the inmate. But at the same time, emotionally, I see Eva as an inmate herself. We meet her in both an actual, and a figurative prison. Therefore, when writing, we wanted to use the same rules as would apply if she was an actual inmate. We never see her home, or life outside of prison. We never see her private wardrobe or apartment or family. We also played with some other archetypes from the inmate perspective in our storytelling. Eva’s journey as an outsider, trying to stay strong in



a violent environment, and the internal power structures of the officers, are all reversed tropes from the classic inmate story. Both in fiction and real life.

/ Eva works in this very masculine environment. How does your heroine fit in?

I think it’s correct that there are more males than females in the film, but I did not want her to appear like an outcast just because she is a woman. There are a number of female officers in the film, and Eva is the only one that separates from the group. What separates Eva is not her gender, but rather her level of implication. But of course she’s a more maternal figure in a very masculine, violent environment, and that plays into the larger themes of the film.



/ The film explores the winding paths that separate revenge and forgiveness...

Yes, definitely... But I think that the film is ultimately about a woman who is herself imprisoned by grief, and her need to break out of that prison. Revenge and forgiveness are two possible ways to do so. But the film hopefully goes beyond saying one is right, and one is wrong. For me it is important to leave the audience with some questions...

/ Her son's murderer reminds Eva of the violence of his assassination, but also of the violence her own son had. At certain times, doesn't she transfer something of her maternal bond onto Mikkel?

The maternal story is an undercurrent of the whole film, and can be found everywhere if you look closely. And yes, I wanted Eva's view on both Mikkel, and all the inmates around her, to be seen through the loss of her son. In the



beginning of the film, Eva is treating all inmates as were they her own son. They are surrogate sons, you could say. That all changes when Mikkel arrives. This hardens her emotions towards the other inmates, and obviously towards Mikkel. But when the psychology gets really interesting to me, is when Mikkel starts reminding Eva of her own son. The two young men merging, victim and perpetrator becoming one. And Eva, the mother, starts to look inwards.

Is her parenting, or lack thereof, responsible for her son's faith?

/ Later on, another key-moment is the one with Mikkel's mom...

There are a lot of things going on in that scene. You have three complex psychologies and they all have their own process going on at this moment. But I think what binds them together is three people trying their best. None



of them came to this place with bad intentions: that's the tragedy of that scene. And obviously the mirroring of the two mothers is a big part of it as well: is Eva looking into her past?

/ Sidse Babett Knudsen is fantastic, and many of the turning points in the story can be read on her face, which is in constant metamorphosis. But this face also retains a large part of opacity. How did you direct her?

First, Sidse and I spent a lot of time talking about the script, because she was attached to the project at a very early stage. We definitely exchanged a lot of ideas about the character's past, her feelings, and who she is outside of the prison, but I kept the script ambiguous in many places. Sidse's performance is incredibly nuanced and subtle, so that it leaves space for the audience to project their own emotions into it. For example, when she turns violent towards Mikkel, I see a woman that is both excited, scared, proud and ashamed of her actions. All at the same time. That is the brilliance of her acting. So for me as a director, on set, it was mainly about creating a space where she could do just that, and then setting out the direction of the scene.



/ How did you cast Sebastian Bull who plays Mikkel? How did you work with him?

I was looking for someone to embody something both childish and dangerous. Whereas I wrote Eva's character for Sidse, we did a very extensive casting for Mikkel's part. I think we basically saw every Danish actor between twenty and thirty-five! Then came Sebastian, and he had this both violent and boyish energy I was looking for, in both his performance, and appearance. He also brought a crazy presence and a very natural delivery. Preparing with Sebastian was in part about analysing the background of the character, but more so about helping him discover the physical elements of the character. Where the anger comes from,

what prison does to your body language and so on. Then on set, it was all about creating the right atmosphere and framework for him, and I think he did a marvellous job.

/ Did you rehearse a lot with the two main actors? Did you have them meet before the shooting?

Apart from Sebastian's last stage of casting which was in front of Sidse, we barely did rehearsals together. I wanted to rather capture something raw and unexpected than to agree on something beforehand. That is my approach in general, but since these two characters have never met before, and since the two actors bring quite different techniques and energies, it made more sense than ever.

/ Where did you shoot the film?

The film was largely shoot on location at Vridsløselille, a prison in the outskirts of Copenhagen which was closed down in 2018. But we also combined it with other locations - underground hospital tunnels, a concrete chapel and an abandoned factory, for example - to give the prison a bigger visual diversity and to create this almost maze like feeling. The production designer, Kristina Kovacs, did an amazing job in

creating this diversity, while at the same time tying all locations together as one.

/ You find many ways to stylize and evolve this almost unique setting... How did you work with your DOP?

Me, Kristina and the DOP Jasper Spanning had a close collaboration from an early stage. We talked visual approach, lighting, and locations while the script was still being written. Later, me and Jasper began breaking down the script in order to find the cameras role in the story. We have worked together for many years, and the starting point is always the same. The main characters state of mind informs how we shoot each scene or sequence. With this film we kept the same approach, but wanted to push the boundaries of naturalism further than we had done in the past. For example by letting Eva's mental space actually change the light within the scene, or introducing surreal elements into a shot.

/ What led to the choice of your narrow aspect ratio?

The format lends itself to portraits and long, narrow hallways... And we have loads of both in this film! We actually shot a couple of test scenes





with Sidse in the prison with different aspect ratios, and the 'academy' ratio just felt right. What the narrow image does - in combination with the broad Dolby Atmos sound - is that it mimics the feeling you have when you are in a prison. A claustrophobic sense of unease, of not knowing what could come from around corner or from behind you. Combining the narrow image format and a broad sound also helped us focus the story on Eva, while suggesting a bigger, ongoing world around her.

/ The Guilty kept all its main action off-camera. Sons has several sequences of fairly graphic

violence. What interests you in this approach?

I am not interested in showing violence per se. But this film takes place in a very violent setting, and a lot of Eva's character development is closely connected to this violence. It has an almost physical effect on her. It changes her. It pushes her boundaries and it changes her morals. It ultimately tells the story of who she becomes as a person. In these pivotal moments, I don't want to suggest, or shy away. I want to put the audience in her shoes. ■

Copenhagen, January 2024.

Photo © Nikolaj Moeller





CREW

Screenplay **GUSTAV MÖLLER & EMIL NYGAARD ALBERTSEN** • Director **GUSTAV MÖLLER** • Cinematography **JASPER J. SPANNING, DFF** • Editing **RASMUS STENSGAARD MADSEN** • Set Design **KRISTINA KOVACS** • Costumes **VIBE KNOBLAUCH HEDEDAM** • Make Up **KAMILLA BJERGLIND** • Casting **DJAMILA HANSEN & GRO THERP** • Sound **OSKARSKRIVER & HANS CHRISTIAN ARNT TORP** • Mixing **OSKAR SKRIVER & HANS CHRISTIAN ARNT TORP** • Music **JON EKSTRAND** • Special Effects **ERIK KOBRO HALS** • 1st Director's Assistant **IDA ØVERSVEN GABRIELSEN** • Scripte **ANNA-LIISA PUTKINEN** • Line Producer **CAROLINE REICHHARDT** Producer **LINA FLINT** • Co-Producer **EVA ÅKERGREN** • Associate Producer **THOMAS HEINESEN** • Executive Producers **HENRIK ZEIN, CALLE MARTHIN, KATRINE VOGELSANG** • Production **NORDISK FILM PRODUCTION (Denmark)** • Co Production **NORDISK FILM PRODUCTION (Sweden)** • Soficas **DFI, SFI, NORDISK FILM & TV FOND** • Other financial partners **DR, SVT** • French distribution & International sales **LES FILMS DU LOSANGE**

CAST

Eva.....	SIDSE BABETT KNUDSEN
Mikkel.....	SEBASTIAN BULL
Rami.....	DAR SALIM
Helle.....	MARINA BOURAS
Head of department.....	OLAF JOHANNESSEN
The Priest.....	JACOB LOHMANN

BIOS

GUSTAV MÖLLER

SIDSE BABETT KNUDSEN

SEBASTIAN BULL

DAR SALIM



GUSTAV MÖLLER

Gustav Möller, a Swedish writer/director based in Denmark, has quickly become a highly sought-after name in Europe and the US. Möller graduated from the renowned Danish Film School in 2015, winning the Next Nordic Generation Award for his thesis film, *In Darkness*.

In 2018, he made his feature film debut with the incredibly successful psychological thriller *The Guilty*, which had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award in the category 'World Cinema Dramatic.' The film went on to win an array of awards around the world, including 'Best Film,' 'Best Director' and 'Best Original Screenplay' at the Danish Film Awards, and was also shortlisted for the Academy Awards.

Jake Gyllenhaal, a self-proclaimed fan, is producer of and stars in the English-language remake of the project, which premiered on Netflix in September 2021.

Furthermore, Möller co-created the TV series *The Dark Heart*, together with writer Oskar Söderlund. The five-part psychological drama premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2022 and has been met with rave reviews. It also went on to win Best Series at the Series Mania International Panorama Competition.

Sons is Gustav's long awaited psychological prison drama starring the Emmy award nominated *Borgen* actress Sidse Babett Knudsen. ■



SIDSE BABETT KNUDSEN

Sidse Babett Knudsen is considered one of the best Danish actresses of her generation – working in both theater, television, and film. Sidse Babett made her Danish screen debut in the 1997 and has over the past decades portrayed many different lead characters on screen and TV always showcasing her great dramatic and comic talent, for which she has been recognized with great critical acclaim and many nominations and awards. Sidse Babett had great success, in Denmark and abroad, playing the iconic lead as Prime Minister Birgitte Nyborg in the critically acclaimed Drama-series ***Borgen***, for which she among other rewards received a Bafta and an Emmy nomination. Internationally, Sidse has been working in UK, US and France credits include e.g. ***The Duke of Burgundy***, ***Limbo***, starring alongside Tom Hanks twice in ***A Hologram for a King*** and Ron Howard's ***Inferno***, ***Club Zero*** and HBO's ***Westworld***. In France Sidse has received the prestigious Cesar Award for ***L'Hermine*** and a Cesar nomination for ***La Fille de Brest***. ■



SEBASTIAN BULL

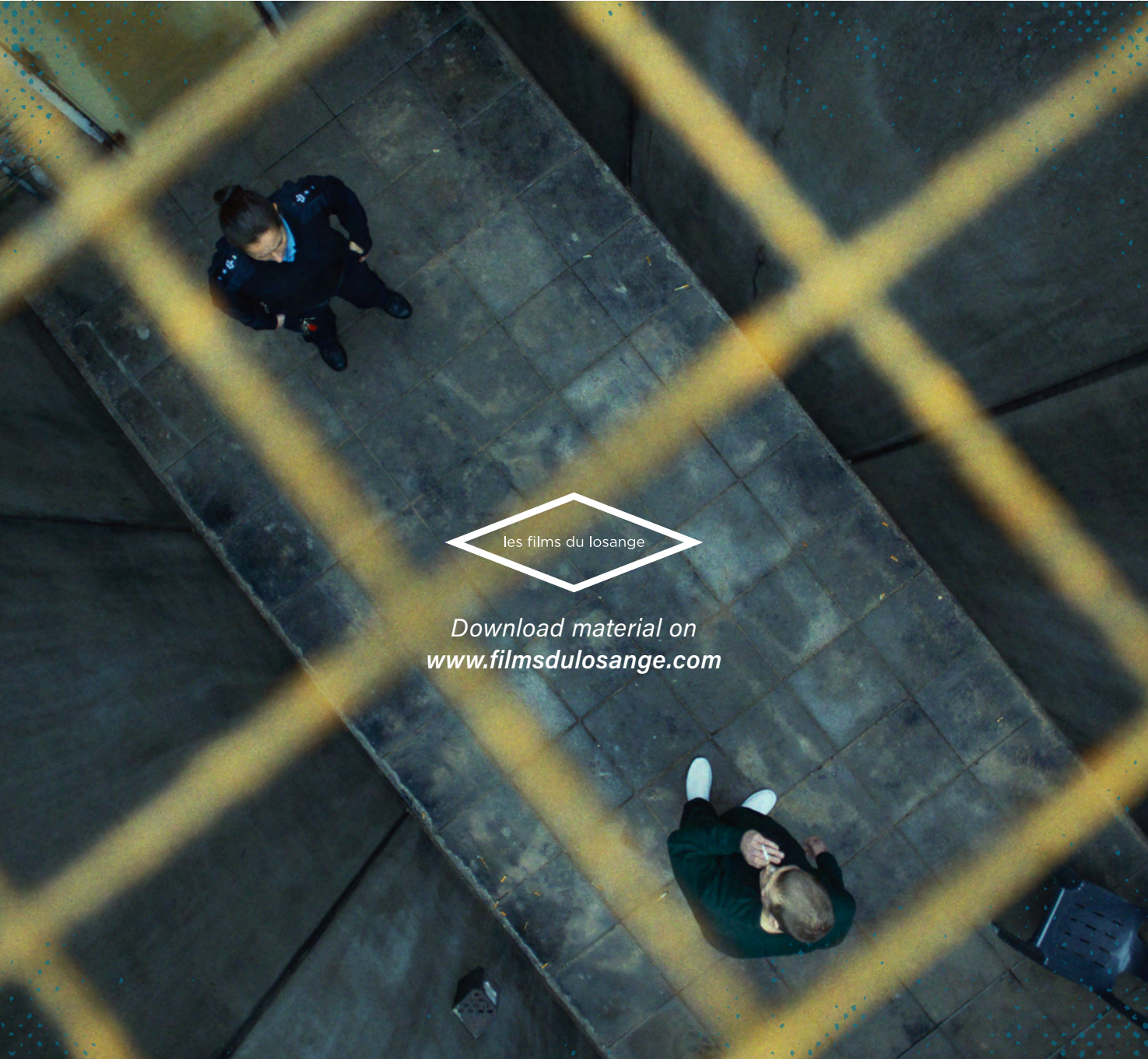
Sebastian Bull (born in 1995 in Hellerup) is a Danish actor. He made his debut in 2010 in Thomas Vinterberg's *Submarino*, where he played the children's version of the main character Nick. Three years later, he was again present when Thomas Vinterberg recorded his critically acclaimed *The Hunt* - this time in the role of Mads Mikkelsen's son Torsten, who has the central role in the film. He has played in other feature films as *9. April* by Roni Ezra (2015) and *Out of Tune* by Frederikke Aspöck (2019). *Sons* by Gustav Möller is his latest work. ■



DAR SALIM

Dar Salim is an Iraqi-born Danish actor. He became known for his role as Green Party chairman Amir Diwan in the Danish TV series *Borgen*, and stars in 2023 film Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant*. Salim trained at the William Esper Studio in New York City and studied method acting in London. He also had private lessons with Danish actress Sarah Boberg. His acting career started with being cast in TV2's television series *Forsvar*. The role that probably gave him the greatest exposure among Danish television viewers was as the Green Party chairman Amir Diwan in *Borgen*. In early 2013, he presented TV2's *Good Evening Denmark*. He starred in TV2's crime drama *Dicte*, for which he received a Best Supporting Actor nomination at the Robert Awards. Salim had recurring roles in Danish thrillers *The Bridge* and *Below the Surface*. He co-starred in the Swedish TV series *Spring Tide*. In 2023 Salim starred alongside Jake Gyllenhaal in Guy Ritchie's *The Covenant* as Ahmed Abdullah, an Afghan interpreter. ■





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