

## Film review

February 25, 2019

### Capernaum

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Directed and co-written by Nadine Labaki, *Capernaum* was awarded the Jury Prize at Cannes 2018. Through the experiences of 12-year-old Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), Labaki explores the daily struggle for existence faced by destitute slum dwellers in Beirut, many of whose existence is never officially recorded or acknowledged. They cannot access health, education, welfare or legal services.

*Capernaum* opens with Zain playing war games with other bedraggled urchins, wielding ingenious homemade weapons. Next, we see the boy in custody, being examined by a doctor. The film details the events leading up to his detention and his subsequent decision to sue his parents.

Married off to Selim (Fadi Youssef) at puberty, Zain's mother Souad (Kawsar Al Haddad) has numerous children, even though they live in one squalid room for which they pay extortionate rent.

She grinds up Tramadol tablets to make "special juice" that Zain and sister Sahar (Haita Cedra Izzam) sell on the street. Zain also works for shopkeeper Assaad (Nour El Husseini), whose unhealthy interest in Sahar alarms her brother. Street-wise Zain is fiercely protective of his siblings, especially Sahar. When he realises that she has begun menstruating, he helps her hide the fact, but he cannot protect her forever and she is married off to the lecherous Assaad. At least she will have a bed, her mother says.

Sad, disillusioned, the boy runs away in search of a better life. He is befriended by Ethiopian illegal refugee Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw) and looks after her toddler Yonas (Boluwatife Treasure Bankole) while she works at a run-down fun fair to earn enough money to buy identity papers from black marketeer Aspro (Alaa Chouchnieh). Returning home in search of his identity papers so he can travel to Sweden, Zain learns of a family tragedy, his violent reaction to which leads to his arrest and detention.

Ironically, conditions in the juvenile institution are better than at home and he learns about his rights through the media — hence his decision to sue his parents for bringing him into the world.

As well as highlighting the child's plight, the courtroom scene also gives voice to the parents' dilemma. Displaced by war, they are illegal immigrants, therefore have no access to basic services. Denied rights and respect themselves, little wonder their parenting is lacking.

Apart from Labaki as Zain's lawyer, all the actors were cast from the street. Labaki asked her actors to speak from their own experiences and thus bring their individual causes to light.



While the basic narrative is intense and often quite distressing, the film contains many gems of spontaneous humour, such as Zain's wildly imaginative explanations for the colour of baby Yonas's skin and "Cockroach Man" Harout (Joseph Jimbazian) and his offsider Daad's (Samira Chalhoub) performance as Rahil's "employers".

Labaki and her production team have achieved a powerful, multilayered and enlightening film. It has already led to Yordanos Shiferaw being granted papers to stay in Lebanon and Zain Al Rafeea's family being relocated to Norway.

## **Stan & Ollie**

**PG\*\*\*\***

Jeff Pope's screenplay for *Stan & Ollie* is based on A.J. Marriot's book, *Laurel and Hardy: the British Tours* about the tour of Britain that Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy undertook in 1953. Directed by Jon S. Baird and starring Steve Coogan and John C. Reilly as Stan and Ollie, the film engages us from the very first scene, which culminates in the blow-up between Stan and producer Hal Roach (Danny Huston), on the set of *Way Out West* in 1937. Repercussions of this incident will resurface 16 years later, threatening to sabotage the British tour and a beautiful friendship.

Although the tour gets off to an inauspicious beginning, Stan writes some new material and the pair are cajoled into undertaking publicity engagements by producer Bernard Delfont (a gloriously unctuous Rufus Jones). By the time their wives, Ida Laurel (Nina Arianda) and Lucille Hardy (Shirley Henderson) arrive in London, the tour is a sell-out, but has clearly taken its toll on Ollie's health.

Throughout the tour, Stan has also been trying to negotiate a film deal for a spoof on Robin Hood, that he and Ollie are planning. Although he knows that the mysterious Mr Miffin does not intend to finance their film, Stan cannot bring himself to disillusion Ollie.

Just when they should all be celebrating their very successful opening night in London, old resentments that have long been festering away, resurface and spark a heated argument, which threatens to end everything; "another nice mess" indeed.

However, these two men are more than a comedy team, more than best friends. Schmaltzy though it may sound, they love one another. Just as Coogan and Reilly deftly capture the complexity of this relationship, Nina Arianda and Shirley Henderson convince as protective, caring women who truly love their partners.

Archival photos of the two couples and clips from their films reinforce the perfection of the casting. Like the performances, Laurie Rose's cinematography and John Paul Kelly's production design are outstanding. Delightful!

## **King of Thieves**

**M\*\*\*\***

Judge Christopher Kinch QC described the 2015 burglary of the Hatton Garden Safe Deposit vault as being "in a class of its own in the scale of the ambition, the detail of the planning, the level of preparation and the organisation of the team carrying it out, and in terms of the value of the property stolen".

When the perpetrators were arrested, public attention centred on their age. All were career criminals aged from 77 to 59. The only member of the gang never caught was the young alarm specialist Basil. *King of Thieves* writer Joe Penhall's access to investigative reporter Duncan Campbell's articles on the case and transcripts of Scotland Yard's investigations, gives the screenplay an authentic feel.

When electrician Basil (Charlie Cox) mentions to recently widowed [Brian Reader](#) (Sir Michael Caine) that he has access to the Hatton Garden Safe Deposit vault, the plan to burgle it over Easter is conceived. Reader assembles a crew of his old mates: insulin-dependent diabetic Terry Perkins (Jim Broadbent); arthritic, deaf John "Kenny" Collins (Sir Tom Courtenay); Danny Jones (Ray Winstone); and Crohn's disease sufferer Carl Wood (Paul Whitehouse). Because they will have to be on site for several days, they have to pack medications as well as their safe-cracking gear.

Being old-school criminals, they are oblivious to the CCTV cameras that will capture their movements and

enable Scotland Yard to identify them. In order to build a water-tight case, the police place them under surveillance and record their conversations.

There is no honour among these old thieves, just distrust. Loyalty proves non-existent. “Kenny” Collins is particularly duplicitous, especially when he’s bragging to his fence mate Billy (Sir Michael Gambon). Terry Perkins’ sadistic bullying verges on the psychopathic.

Director James Marsh and his actors ensure that these men are portrayed realistically as the criminals they are. Flashes of their younger selves shows how they still perceive themselves. Watching the investigation proceed from the police perspective at the same time as from the various gang members’ perspectives is amusing. Although the situations and characters provide much incidental humour, we laugh at them not with them. It’s well worth a look.

### ***The Sisters Brothers***

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*The Sisters Brothers* is a sprawling western based on Canadian Patrick DeWitt’s novel about Eli and Charlie Sisters, infamous gunmen in the American wild west in the 1850s, the gold rush era.

Eli (John C. Reilly) and Charlie (Joachim Phoenix) are employed by Oregon-based The Commodore (Rutger Hauer) to assassinate individuals of his choosing.

As the brothers set out on their new assignment, Eli displays a certain sensibility, musing at length about his career choice, while Charlie is a trigger-happy, bullying, hard-drinking pragmatist. Another of The Commodore’s employees, John Morris (Jake Gyllenhaal), is scouting ahead for their target, one Hermann Kermit Warm (Riz Ahmed). Like most of their fellow countrymen, all three men are susceptible to the lure of gold, so upon learning that Warm has developed a chemical formula for a liquid which, when poured into a river, makes the gold therein shine brightly, they reconsider their allegiance to The Commodore.

En route to the golden streams of San Francisco, the brothers kill numerous similarly trigger-happy others, apparently without remorse. As is the custom, they shoot first and ask questions later. Life is cheap. Distrust of one’s fellow man is all-pervasive.

Whereas DeWitt’s novel has a certain quaint charm, recounted as it is by Eli Sisters, the screenplay by director Jacques Audiard and Thomas Bidegain, fails to capture the curiously gentlemanly turn of phrase of DeWitt’s dialogue. Eli’s eloquence all but disappears and anachronistic expletives rob Charlie of any potentially redeeming features. With its emphasis on explicit violence the film is Tarantino-esque.

*The Sisters Brothers* is included in the 30th Alliance Francaise French Film Festival program presumably because director Jacques Audiard is French. The lead actors are American, the cast and crew are multinational and it was shot in Spain, Romania and France.

See [affrenchfilmfestival.org](http://affrenchfilmfestival.org) for full details about the 2019 Alliance Francaise French Film Festival, which will screen from 5 March to 10 April. I am especially looking forward to **At War** (directed by Stephane Brize and starring Vincent Lindon) and Lukas Dhont’s *Girl* about a transgender adolescent ballet dancer. Several other films from the festival have already been acquired by a local distributor.

**Tricia Youlden** is on extended LSL