



FILM: **THE MAURITANIAN**

FDG RATING: 3.5 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Kevin Macdonald: *director*
Tahar Rahimi: *actor, Mohamedou Ould Slahi*
Jodie Foster: *actress, Nancy Hollander*
Benedict Cumberbatch: *actor, Lt. Col. Stuart Couch*

DATE: June 20, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE MAURITANIAN**

The Mauritanian is based on the 2015 published diary of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's account of his 14 year detention, mainly at Guantanamo Bay. He was still in prison when it was published but US authorities permitted its publication after redacting numerous passages. Slahi described how he was continuously tortured to get him to confess to being a recruiter for Osama bin Laden after his arrest just after the Sept. 11 attacks. In the film, Tahar Rahim is outstanding as Mohamedou Ould Slahi. In his performance, he perfectly balanced stoic, unbreakable desperate innocence despite horrific torture, with a hint of questionable guilt. In the end, we really don't know if he is guilty or innocent. What we do know, and witness in graphic detail, is that the brutal torture of prisoners, (inhumane treatment that we abhor when committed by other countries), was practiced *modus operandi* at Guantanamo Bay.

We first meet Mohamedou at his sister's wedding reception in Mauritania where his family and friends are joyously celebrating. The police arrive, request to see him, and then swiftly take him away. He assures his mother that the problem will be quickly resolved and he will return. He does not see his family again for 14 years. From 2002 to 2016, he is incarcerated without charge in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, a United States military prison.

Despite winning a Golden Globe for best supporting actress in the film, some discussion participants were disappointed in Jodie Foster's performance as lawyer Nancy Hollander who is asked by her firm to look into his case since a lawyer from Mauritania approached his firm in Paris on behalf of Mohamedou's family. They haven't seen Mohamedou since he was arrested three years ago and only just found out in a newspaper that he is being held by the US at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, accused of being one of the organizers of 9/11. Hollander's defense team know he received a phone call from his cousin from a location inside the bin Laden compound. We also learn he was 18 years old when he was awarded a scholarship to a college in Germany which could have afforded him the opportunity to recruit for al-Qaeda.

Hollander has a reputation for taking on human rights issues and agrees to represent Slahi. One discussion participant who is a Jodie Foster fan said this was not a good role for her and criticized her over dramatization. Another commented that she plays a tough ass lawyer but at one point where she is wiping her teary eyes, her emotions seemed artificial. Another comment was that her bright red lipstick was distracting, however, referencing actual photos of Hollander, her appearance was captured authentically.

One resident reviewer noted that it is a great story but not a good movie. The acting was not good, with the exception of Benedict Cumberbatch who played Lt. Col. Stuart Couch, a Marine Corps lawyer, the only character with personal honor in the reviewer's opinion. The one security guard who somewhat befriended Shali was also a more rounded character, but the rest were flat with the military people presented as complete jerks. Couch is the prosecutor with some skin in the game; his buddy was one of the pilots that died on 9/11. Scenes of Hollander and Couch delivering speeches and sifting through heavily redacted documents are interspersed with graphic, flash-back interrogation scenes. An observant discussion participant caught incongruous gestures such as when Hollander reaches across the table to catch Slahi's hand probably to show her transition from cold hearted to sympathetic, but there would be no touching in the Muslim culture.

During the end credits as the film's real-life subject, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, listens to the Bob Dylan song, The Man In me, laughing delightedly and singing along, he's the picture of contentment — not of someone who just spent more than 14 years in an infamous American prison. For one published critic, that was the most enjoyable moment of the Guantánamo drama noting that Shali seemed happy, not holding a grudge. One resident reviewer strongly disagreed noting that he seemed glib, arrogant, self-satisfied that he had pulled the wool over our eyes. An indication of guilt.

Thought provoking but extremely disturbing and uncomfortable to watch, we rated The Mauritanian a questionably decisive 3.5 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).

Footnote: In Slahi's habeas challenge, a federal district court judge determined Slahi's detention was unlawful and ordered him released in 2010. The U.S. government successfully appealed that decision.



See you at the movies!

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