MAKING OF

Son of Saul

A first-time director, an unknown actor, an uncompromising look at the hellish Nazi death camps — defying all odds, László Nemes' film took Cannes by storm and became Hungary's Oscar entry

BY GREGG KILDAY, THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

Erdély shooting Röhrig in an exterior section of the film's set.

On the very first day they visited the set of *Son of Saul* — before the bustle of filming, before the crew arrived to set up lights and before extras were called to take their places — production designer László Rajk led director László Nemes and cinematographer Mátyás Erdély through his re-creation of a crematorium from the notorious Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp that he had built in an old warehouse on the outskirts of Budapest. As they walked through the foreboding rooms, a heavy iron door accidentally slammed shut, trapping Erdély alone inside the set's gas chamber. As Rajk recounts it, when the door was opened, Erdély, who lost relatives in Nazi concentration camps, came out "completely pale and shocked."

Audiences emerging from screenings of *Saul*, which had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in May, have been affected similarly. The film — Hungary's foreign-language Oscar submission, set to be released in the U.S. on Dec. 18 by Sony Pictures Classics — focuses tightly on one man, Saul, a member of the Sonderkommando, the Jewish prisoners forced to staff the gas chambers. He goes about his hellish assignment like one of the walking dead until he stumbles upon the body of a young boy and begins an impossible quest to give the boy a proper burial. What sets the movie apart from previous Holocaust dramas is that, visually and aurally, Nemes forces the viewer to walk in Saul's shoes, experiencing the sights and sounds that swirl around him in an unmitigated rush of shadowy images and barked commands. "It's trying to give an immersive experience to the viewer by coexisting with the main character," explains Nemes, 38. "In this way, we can emphasize his individual experience, not jumping around with different points of view, to make things more easily understood by the audience."

For the director, *Saul* is the culmination of a quest. Born in Hungary and having studied in Paris, he was working as an assistant director on fellow Hungarian Bela Tarr's *The Man From London* in 2005 when on a day off he wandered into a bookstore in Bastia, France, and discovered a volume published by the Shoah Memorial titled *Voices From Beneath the Ashes* — a collection of testimonies written by the Sonderkommando that described the workings of the Nazi death camps. "As a reader, I was transported to the very present of the Holocaust and the very heart of the extermination machine — it was so powerful. From that moment on, I knew I wanted to make a film about one member of the Sonderkommando," says Nemes.

It took years, though, to distill those accounts into a story. Not until 2011 did Nemes, working with co-screenwriter Clara Royer, complete a first draft of the *Saul* script. "I had to first find an angle, the basic, core story," he says. "I knew I wanted something very primitive. That became the main character's story — a man, working in a crematorium, finding a boy, thinking he's his son and trying to bury him — that came years after."

In the meantime, working with longtime collaborators Erdély, Rajk and sound designer Tamás Zányi, Nemes experimented with the stylistic approach that would find full expression in *Saul*. In many ways, his first short film, 2007's *With a Little Patience*, serves as an overture to *Saul*. The camera watches as a young woman comes into focus, enters a building, silently walks to a desk and proceeds with a series of tasks — all as the sounds of the office's click-clack routine surround her. Finally she walks to a window and gazes across a field where a group of SS officers are rounding up prisoners, stripping them down and leading them away. Without a word, she closes the window and returns to her work, leaving the viewer to put the pieces together.

Erdély explains the approach he and Nemes developed together: "We try to hide as much of the information as possible but give the audience just the right amount of information in the exact right moment. It's about controlling the visual information and using sound in relation to that. I can give you the sound of something without showing it to you, and then when I show it to you it's going to have a much bigger effect because you saw it at first out of focus or blurred but you heard the sound of it, so you have a relationship with it.

1. From left: Röhrig, Erdély and Nemes on the set of *Son of Saul*. Says Nemes, "The film gives a voice to something that can't be communicated with words, and to me that is very touching."

2. Röhrig (center) prepares for a take. "It was rather scary." Says Nemes of the crematorium set. "I wanted to have the interior and exterior connected, and also interior levels."

3. Royer, who wrote the screenplay with Nemes, with the films Marcin Czarnick.

4. Says Röhrig of his character, Saul: "I realized that there are two Sauls. One is before he meets the boy and one after. Before he meets the boy, his humanity is shutdown – he's a robot. After he meets the boy, he's a maniac, and that's a different intensity. I had to find a way from Saul 1 to Saul 2."

The whole idea is based on this desire to be super-subjective and base the experience on a single person — that is the key. It's almost like being there because it's so subjective."

As *Saul* began to take shape, Nemes sent the screenplay to his friend Géza Röhrig, a Hungary-born poet who lives in Brooklyn. Röhrig was struck by how vividly the script presented the director's vision. "Most movies treat the Holocaust in a very poor and silly way. I was very worried about the pitfalls," he says. "I could see from the script that László defied the dangers of a movie about Auschwitz exactly the way I would have done it — we were on the same wavelength. The script was very well written. Even the sounds and the reduced visual accessibility, I knew from the script, would make the viewer's experience easier on one hand because you would not have to confront some of the horrors. But on the other hand, it makes that experience much harder because it is left to your imagination. You are going to carry the blow yourself in a very personal way."

On what he calls "an intuition," Nemes invited Röhrig to audition for the movie, though the director originally expected to offer his friend a supporting role. Instead, during the course of two weeks, he decided Röhrig should play Saul, even though Röhrig hadn't worked in film since appearing in two Hungarian movies during the late 1980s. "For me, he had this sort of obsessive quality," explains Nemes. "A man with many layers, someone who is both ordinary and extraordinary." Röhrig, who as a teenager in Budapest played in an underground punk band (after being kicked out of high school for anti-Communist activities), was up for the challenge.

"I'm not the kind of guy who has stage fright," he says with a laugh.

Finding financing for the film — an austere drama by a first-time feature director, starring an unknown actor — was not easy, to say the least. "At first it was supposed to be a French film, but there was tremendous resistance in France to this project," says Nemes. So he brought it back to Hungary, where producers Gábor Sipos and Gábor Rajna came aboard. They attempted to find co-financing from other countries, but even though the film was budgeted at only 1.5 million euro, they came up short. Ultimately, the Hungarian National Film Fund shouldered the costs.

For the film's design, Nemes turned to Rajk, a Hungarian designer, architect and political activist who didn't have to start from scratch because he already had designed the permanent Hungarian exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. But Rajk did not approach the task literally. "Our main goal was not to create authentically the whole structure of the crematoria," he explains. "For us, it was more important to show the functional structure of the death factory — to show the spaces between the furnace, the changing room, the so-called showers, the surgery room."

In some ways, the sets Rajk created were more impressionistic than realistic. "From a production designer's point of view, the space is not very rich in details," he says, and that was intentional. In 1944, when the film takes place, parts of the camp were newly built. Survivors, in their memoirs, have described how the barbed wire was still shiny and the buildings smelled of fresh paint. "But filmmakers have forced into the minds of people that everything connected with the murders of the Holocaust is dirty, smelly," says Rajk, so the film adopted a darker look.

"It was not a studio; it was a real place," says Nemes of filming on such an eerie set. "In a sense, you were there as a witness: You had a feeling you were in a crematorium, rather than on a movie set. For that reason, cast and crew believed they were in a real situation. The fact that we used longer shots also contributed to the organic feeling within the shoot itself. Everyone could relate to it in a much more visceral sense — we were immersed in this world. It made it more difficult in a psychological way, but it made our work much more concentrated, with a sense of mission."

The shoot, which took only 28 days, quickly developed its own routine. As cinematographer, using two types of 35mm cameras — an Arricam LT and a smaller Arri 235 — Erdély composed the film using long takes. While no shot is longer than four minutes, the 107-minute movie has only 85 shots. Says Erdély: "László was super-meticulous about every single shot — he had the whole film planned to the last image. All of the shots, including the movement of the background, everything was

preplanned and discussed as much as we could, making sure each shot had its own rhythm and arc."

The days did not unfold as they often do on a conventional film. Instead of beginning by shooting establishing shots then breaking a scene down into a series of two-shots, reactions and close-ups, Nemes would spend most of each day on rehearsals, working with the principals, extras and camera crew to orchestrate each shot. Toward the end of the day, the camera would roll, capturing a three- to four-minute take. "The choreography had to be perfect," recalls Röhrig. For him, the biggest challenge in playing Saul wasn't hitting his marks, "but I had to show this burnt-out type of human being. It was the only possible way of surviving, the soulless ushering of the living victims into the gas chamber and the obvious moral dilemma of assisting in the death process. That was the type of thing I had the hardest time doing."

Filming *Saul* was only the half of it. When he began the project, says Nemes, he told sound designer Zányi that sound ultimately would amount to 50 percent of the movie. Zányi responded by laughing incredulously. "Most directors start by saying that in their movie sound would be more important than usual, but in most cases that doesn't turn out to be the case," says Zányi of his initial skepticism. "In this movie, however, we did manage to add a great deal of redundant information, mostly atmospheric, to supplement the photography and the story. We managed to develop a kind of autonomous acoustic dimension without making sound an end in itself. I would describe the sound in *Saul* as a sort of acoustic counterpoint to the intentionally narrowed imagery. We were trying to use documentary like sounds to illustrate that dreadful place."

The *Son of Saul* cast and crew check out the playback of a scene. "Every scene was difficult for different reasons," says Nemes. "I had to direct people from several countries in several languages, many that I did not speak."

Dialogue — the shouts of the guards, the cries of the prisoners — was recorded in a babel of eight languages. Zányi says his work on a typical Hungarian feature takes him and his three- to four-person team about two months, but for *Saul* the entire process took twice that long.

On the closing night of Cannes, presenter Mads Mikkelsen called Nemes to the stage. Not only had *Saul* been invited to be part of the official competition, a highly unusual honor for a first-time filmmaker, but also the film received the Grand Prix, the festival's second-highest award.

As the applause died down, some audience members found themselves debating one key question: Is the boy Saul is determined to put to rest properly actually his son? As Nemes tells it, in early versions of the screenplay, it was clearer the boy was Saul's son, but in eliminating back stories for the characters, that became more ambiguous. He says, "We tried to resolve that issue of whether he's his son or not, but I think in the evolution, in a very instinctive way, we preserved a sort of doubt at the heart of it because I believe in films to have a secret in their heart."

Röhrig has his own view: "If you ask me, it makes the whole thing much weaker if you think he had to be his son. I think he was not his son at all; I think he was his son in a symbolic, Jewish way. He might have just looked like his son. He adopted this boychick, and that's the most mysterious moment of the movie. Saul realizes, 'I can't bury them all, but I'm going to bury this one.' He gets this purpose that is not so much a result of his thought process — it's more enigmatic than that. And that makes him happy. He's a very fulfilled, happy person to me in the movie — probably the only one."