

## 'The Mauritanian' recounts a horrifying ordeal

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun  
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 129 minutes

**This feature from STXfilms is currently available On Demand everywhere.**

Based on a true story, the new drama *The Mauritanian* involves an African man who was arrested in his hometown, passed to United States officials and detained in Guantanamo Bay for more than 14 years. All of this occurred without a criminal charge ever being levied against him. Admittedly, some of this earnest drama's courtroom procedurals don't offer new or dynamic cinematic storytelling techniques. However, the numerous hardships this person was forced to endure without justification make this a tale worth telling.

Mohamedou Ould Slahi (Tahar Rahim) is the Mauritanian, a man who disappears after being removed from a family celebration. Taken by local police for questioning in the attacks on September 11th, Slahi finds himself being given to Jordanian authorities and then to U.S. interrogators. It is soon alleged that he was member of Al Qaeda and took part in coordinating the attacks. The protagonist is secretly moved to Guantanamo Bay to be tortured by captors.

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Years later, Slahi manages to write a letter to U.S. attorneys Nancy Hollander (Jodie Foster) and Teri Duncan (Shailene Woodley). After they look into the case, they decide to fight for his release. Concerned, the U.S. government assigns prosecutor Stuart Couch (Benedict Cumberbatch) to convict Slahi. This stern lawyer is unflinching in his desire to win, but even he is troubled by disturbing anomalies and falsified evidence in the case files.

The screenplay focuses a large portion of its time with attorneys Hollander and Duncan and their gradual disclosure of events, which makes sense as a technique to slowly unveil Slahi's story to viewers. All of the actors are very strong and the material itself is decent. However, there is an unavoidable formality to some of the legal proceedings, with the narrative playing out in a familiar manner. It also takes the audience away from Slahi himself and his awful ordeal.

At least one of the story's interesting tangents is the character of Couch, a military man who lost a close friend in the September 11th attacks. His character slowly pivots as he becomes confused by superiors hiding details from him. It is interesting to see the attorney change from a conservative prosecutor determined to put the defendant away, to a man doubting the validity of his own charges.

Obviously, it's Rahim who is the film's standout. Slahi is taken out of the blue and, over the course of more than a decade, viewers see some of the indignities forced upon him. As time progresses, we witness the toll this abuse takes on his sanity and how being in such a mental state can drain any prisoner of hope. When the filmmakers focus specifically on the prisoner, the film is at its most effective.

Viewers empathize with his plight and the terror of not knowing what is happening or whom he can trust. The role requires an incredible range and the performer expertly handles the job.

On a technical level, the Guantanamo Bay sets are also impressive. Despite being surrounded by the beach and ocean, the facility, fences and military officials lend a foreboding feeling to the proceedings. Additionally, the sterile and blank interiors emphasize the unpleasantness of the prison and display just how isolated and locked off the building is from the rest of the world. It is truly ominous and helps audiences to experience the horror of Slahi's circumstance.

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So, while there aren't a great many surprises in the story itself, the performances are excellent, particularly from the detainee, as he finds himself in a seemingly unending ordeal. The message is also important, reminding one that while hundreds of detainees are still incarcerated at this site, few have ever been charged with committing any kind of crime. In the end, it makes an effective case for shutting down these barbarous techniques and the location itself. As a result, *The Mauritanian* is a sometimes stiff, but admirable drama for its attempts to bring a deplorable situation to light.

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