

The silent treatment

Actor 'learned to be deaf' for story of a drummer who loses his hearing

by Chris Knight

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SOUND OF METAL

★★★ out of 5

Cast: Riz Ahmed,

Olivia Cooke

Director: Darius Marder

Duration: 2 h

For their first 30 years, the movies unspooled in silence. **Sound of Metal** takes us back in a way, with the story of a heavy metal drummer who loses his hearing.

Riz Ahmed stars as Ruben Stone. We first meet him on the stage with his girlfriend/manager Lou (Olivia Cooke) thrashing on a drum kit while she belts out a song. If you can't make out the lyrics, don't worry — the entire film is helpfully subtitled. Offstage the couple is more musically restrained, listening to jazz and blues in the Airstream trailer that is their home. But Ruben's choice of recreational listening is too little, too late. When his hearing suddenly falters, he visits an audiologist and receives the bad news. "No matter how loud I made the test — I could have put it at 11 — you were still going to miss 70 to 80 per cent of the words that I said." (I'm sure the doctor didn't mean it, but throwing a Spinal Tap reference at an ailing drummer is terrible bedside manner!)

Ruben starts spiralling out of control, and Lou decides he needs a support group before his past addictions — referenced but



Riz Ahmed, who plays a drummer named Ruben, nails his deaf character's sense of confusion and frustration in *Sound of Metal*. AMAZON STUDIOS

never seen — get the better of him. As luck would have it, she finds a group home for addicts who are also deaf, run by the tough-love Joe. Ruben, plowing through seven stages of grief at his hearing loss, reluctantly agrees to give it a try. As Joe, Paul Raci is the real deal. The actor is a veteran, a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults), an American Sign Language interpreter and a musician. In contrast, Ahmed had to learn how to play the drums, how to sign and, mirroring a scene in *Sound of Metal*, "learn to be deaf." In the film this is Joe's way of saying Ruben has to come to grips with his disability and how it will change his life. (An example: Instead of knocking on a door, Joe reaches into a room to turn the lights off and on to announce his arrival.) In practice, the actor wore a device that emitted white noise to interfere with his hearing. And for the audience, writer-director Darius Marder employs a variety of effects. Sometimes we hear things "normally," including birdsong and insect trill, helpfully echoed in the subtitles. Elsewhere we're in Ruben's head, noises garbled as

though coming through deep water. And in several striking moments the sound drops out completely. It's disorientating, purposefully and effectively so. Ahmed nails his character's sense of confusion and frustration. One scene finds him at a dining table in the group home, shut out of the conversation as everyone else signs fluidly at one another, hands aflutter. The soundtrack shifts from the clang of tableware to the muted version of the same that is all the noise to reach him. Though it runs a full two hours, **Sound of Metal** sometimes seems to be rushing to cram all it can into the storyline. Lou drops out of the picture for most of its middle section, staying with her father (Mathieu Amalric) until Ruben decides to rejoin her. There's much talk of Ruben going back to heroin, but little

evidence that he's tempted to do so.

Finally, the film has to deal with the polarizing topic of deaf culture — I'm simplifying to the max when I say it comes down to those who define deafness as a disease to be cured, and those who see it as just part of who they are, like skin colour or personality type. **Sound of Metal** avoids taking a stand, although Ruben and Joe clearly represent two points of view. Viewers can decide what they might do in the drummer's shoes. It's a fascinating, frightening what-if.

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