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The Song of Names



DRAMA

113 minutes · PG-13 · 2019

[Glenn Kenny](#)

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It's 1951, and a major musical event is about to enliven London's classical scene. The evening depicted in this movie's opening will feature a young violin virtuoso, Dovidl Rapaport, playing a program of Bruch and Bach. Dovidl's friend Martin, a fellow in his early twenties like the absent violinist, tries to reassure the older folks around him that the musician wouldn't miss this date.

But he does. And Martin never sees him again. More than 30 years later, this is still eating at the adult Martin, played by [Tim Roth](#). Now a music teacher, married to his teen sweetheart, he finds himself intrigued by an auditioning

would-be student who rosins his bow in a particular way. That way belonged to Dovidl, who, we learn in flashbacks, was an arrogant child prodigy left in the care of Martin's father before the outbreak of World War II. The boy Dovidl is a disruptive Jew in a mode recalling that of [Philip Roth](#). A self-proclaimed genius, he initially infuriates the buttoned-up young Martin. But they soon become the best of friends, and in England, young Dovidl is molded (insofar as he can be molded) by Martin's doting father, who's grooming him for a career. Even as his family back in Poland is being shuttled to Treblinka.

Based on a novel by [Norman Lebrecht](#) (the screenplay is by [Jeffrey Caine](#)) and directed by [François Girard](#), "The Song of Names" is a pointed demonstration that "survivor's guilt" is a rather more complex state than the slightly glib phrase suggests. In his late adolescence, agonizing over the still-unknown fate of his family, Dovidl renounces Judaism and acts out in other ways. But his failure to show up for the concert that Martin's father put his life into, and subsequent absence from Martin's life, seems an inexplicable betrayal.

Tim Roth plays the Martin of the 1980s with a controlled agony; it's one of the actor's most purposefully understated performances, and it makes the movie worth seeing. The adult Dovidl is played by [Clive Owen](#), and since this is in part a detective story, I am hesitant to describe him in much detail except to say it's Owen as you've never seen him before. The character's own agony derives from his definitive discovery of his family's fate—literally a

life changing moment. The titular “Song of Names,” sacred music with a ritual function, is not merely explained but turns to a motif.

Literate, sober, soulful, and considered as it is, the movie is also a little overly scrupulous in its tastefulness. “The Song of Names” doesn’t get its hands dirty; as crassly as young Dovidl behaves, as much of a chip on his shoulder the adult Martin carries, director Girard, whose filmography includes low-key meditations like “[The Red Violin](#)” and “33 Short Films About Glenn Gould,” keeps things emotionally tamped down. In the case of Roth’s character, it gives the actor some new places to go. But in other respects, the approach, which is most pronounced in the sun-dappled wanderings over blitzed-out London by the two boys, feels slightly cramped and more than familiar.