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**HOTEL HARABATI**  
*De Particulier a Particulier*  
(France)

A Films Distribution presentation of a Mille et une production. (International sales: Films Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Marc Irmer. Directed by Brice Cauvin. Screenplay, Cauvin, Jerome Beaujour, Pierre Scholler.

**With:** Helene Fillieres, Laurent Lucas, Anouk Aimee, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Julie Gayet.  
(French, Arabic dialogue)

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By [EDDIE COCKRELL](#)

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**A masterfully crafted, low-key meditation on post-9/11 urban fear and malaise in which a French couple and their two children embark on a strange journey of paranoia and discovery, "Hotel Harabati" manages that rare feat of keeping auds' eyes glued to the screen while not actually showing its narrative hand. Fest buzz will prompt distribs to check into this, with solid arthouse bookings possible.**

While waiting to catch a train from Paris to Venice, 35-year-old French couple Philippe (Laurent Lucas) and Marion (Helene Fillieres) pick up a tan valise left behind by a courtly, vaguely Middle Eastern gentleman. There is foreign writing and the phrase "tel Harabati" on the tag, and a great deal of neatly bound bundles of foreign currency inside.

Later, back in Paris, they begin telling his mother Nelly (Anouk Aimee) and their social circle they've been to Venice, when it's clear from their private conversations they decided at the last minute not to go. No more mention is made of the cash.

Though Philippe's job at an architectural firm specializing in tanning salons is rapidly going sour, the couple is looking for a larger flat for themselves and their two young sons. The bag, and sightings of a fellow on the street and on TV, have made Philippe skittish about where to live, and his nervousness is fueled by constant news reports of bombings and other sudden violence. They finally decide on an apartment across town, even as Philippe is messily fired. Meanwhile, Marion has barricaded herself and her children in their old, cramped flat, and vaguely threatening calls from the bank and the seller of the new digs go unreturned. When photos of Venice appear, the money resurfaces and the family is reunited in Syria, as many questions are raised as answers.

In his debut feature, 40-year-old Brice Cauvin exhibits the firm control over complex material usually associated with far more senior helmers. Though tinged with plot elements from

Michael Haneke's first ("The Seventh Continent") and most recent ("Hidden") films, "Hotel Harabati" never feels as bleakly oppressive as Haneke's work, playing as oddly funny by virtue of slyly muted central perfs. And no matter how oblique the character motivations become, pic as a whole never comes close to derailing.

Craft contributions are streamlined and straightforward, led by the authentic clutter of Philippe Van Herwijnen's astute production design. Though English-language title is thematically spot-on, literal translation of the French moniker describes private sales from one individual to another, suggesting that "For Sale by Owner" might also have done the trick.

Camera (color), Marc Tevanian; editor, Agathe Cauvin; music, Philippe Miller; production designer, Philippe Van Herwijnen; costume designer, Eleonore Dominguez; sound, Pierre Tucac, Loic Prian, Benjamin Viau. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Forum), Feb. 12, 2006.  
Running time: 94 MIN.