

The Class

The new French movie *The Class* (“Entre Les Murs”) toys with the difference between fictional and documentary material and, in mingling them, gets at some deeper truths about the fitful education of immigrant populations in any urban center. It is one of five foreign language films nominated for an Academy Award this year and would be, I will say in advance, a worthy winner.

The director, Laurent Cantet, is a distinguished contemporary French filmmaker who casts a clear, unjaundiced eye on social institutions which are rarely treated honestly in commercial films. His smart *Human Resources* (1999) examined business-labor relations in the context of a father and son dynamic, and his unsettling *Time Out* (2001) offered a telling example of what too much pressure in the business world can lead to. Here he takes on the world of public education.

The setting is very specific: a diverse class—African, Asian, Muslim, etc.--of junior high students in a relatively poor section of Paris observed over one school year. Their teacher is M. Marin (Francois Begaudeau) an earnest 30-something who wants to do well by his kids but who must contend with their often unruly and distracted natures. Contending with some of them also means singling them out for castigation and even expulsion, an act that we learn can threaten the very lives of some of the kids and their families.

This is, clearly, no *To Sir, With Love*, *Stand and Deliver*, or *Dangerous Minds*, that standard school flick where the inspired teacher redeems impoverished, troubled students through a discovery of learning. Here the positive outcomes are rare and tenuous while the muddling through and the periodic truces are more common. Further, the film does not skirt the wider context of the school, with revealing scenes of staff meetings, which express what is both heartening and banal in the profession, as well as some heart-rending parent-teacher conferences.

The Class was conceived using improvisation, and it plays like a revealing documentary, using hand-held cameras that continually focus on teacher and student, picking up on their interactions as astute but sensitive observers. Moreover, the teacher M. Marin is not really an actor (though he plays his “part” to perfection) but the actual Begaudeau himself, a teacher who wrote a book on which the film is based and who contributed to its form. Here, he is truly acting out his own life.

Likewise, the students are all teenage non-actors riffing on their own experiences in the classroom. Standout characters among the students include a touchy kid from Mali, Souleymane, itching to test M. Marin, Sandra, a smart-alecky gal harboring unknown hurts, and Wei, a Chinese kid trying to fit in.

Lest it appear too stolid, be aware that this small world contains real drama, especially at a key moment when a frustrated Marin launches an epithet at one of the girls in the class, an incident that escalates tensions for all and even threatens Marin’s job. *The Class* has humor, too, much of it stemming from the differing world views of the proper bourgeois Marin and his more unfettered charges. Above all, it demonstrates, in microcosm, the terribly hard work that teaching requires in our time, and observes it very humanely and believably.

(“*The Class*” is rated “PG-13; running time is 128 mins.)

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