

Monsieur Lazhar

Every year at Academy Awards time, movie buffs learn of foreign language films which they have never seen. These films, submitted by individual countries, are nominated by members of a special screening committee. The final five, selected late in the previous year, only rarely get a commercial release in the US before the ceremony itself. Still, the selection committee often does a fine job, and, with luck, Americans get to see the best of these international works.

This year, the finalists have, for this reviewer, indubitably proved their worth. As it turns out, three have already been assessed in these pages (“A Separation,” “In Darkness,” and “Footnote”). This column describes another fine nominee, “Monsieur Lazhar,” made in French Canada.

The monsieur of the title is a 55-year old Algerian immigrant living in Montreal. Needing work, he notices in the paper of the suicide of a teacher in an elementary school, applies for the job (lying about his lack of credentials), and is hired by the desperate school. While Bachir Lazhar (Fellag) encounters some culture shock in dealing with his class, he is diligent and adaptable and slowly adjusts to his charges. Those students, particularly the bright Alice (Sophie Nélisse) and the troubled Simon (Émilien Néron), find themselves struggling to understand the fate of their beloved teacher, Mlle. LaChance.

Meanwhile, Lazhar himself undergoes his own personal trial. He has lost his activist wife and a daughter in Algeria and is anxiously awaiting a ruling on a refugee application to grant him asylum in Canada. A budding romance might be possible with another teacher, Claire (Brigitte Poupart), but Lazhar has time only for his kids and trying to get them over their loss. That catharsis is made the harder by the sturdy school rules against any physical contact with the students. Lazhar tries to do what he can before he is finally found out.

French-Canadian director Philippe Falardeau(see story below) directed the film and adapted it from a play “Bachir Lazhar” by Evelyne de la Chenelière. He has made a decidedly low-key but very humane film, one where small moments become more portentous because of the delicacy of the telling. “Monsieur Lazhar” is full of such subtle treasures, as when Bachir seems so sweetly oblivious to Claire’s moves on him. Or when Lazhar tries, uncomprehendingly, to read the faces of a judge who will rule on his case. Or, most tellingly of all, at the very end of the picture, when a simple act by Alice comforts her, redeems Lazhar, and wondrously violates the “touching” ban—all in one sequence.

Falardeau has cast well. A parade of teachers and youngsters are convincing and natural. The two lead child actors, young Nélisse and Néron, are exceptional, just youngsters but playing nuanced, complex people. Fellag (he goes by one name) dominates the film as Lazhar with a measured mien, a mix of perplexed, thoughtful, and mostly, quietly compassionate. You root for him to make it in North America.

(The film is rated “PG-13” and runs 94 minutes.)

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Views of the Director

In a conversation with a DC screening audience, director Philippe Falardeau described the creation of his “Monsieur Lazhar.” He formed his film from a one-man show, de la Chenelière’s play. Thus, he had to devise parts for a whole range of characters only mentioned in the play’s text, and even invent some, like the little boy Simon. He also had to devise the whole matter of the school’s business, the classrooms and activities, the teacher conferences and the parents’ meetings, etc.

He also shifted the film thematically. The original play dealt more with Lazhar’s asylum conundrum; Falardeau wanted to emphasize the context of the school. He did a lot of research to get the flavor of Canadian schools but realized he couldn’t just hang around the schoolyard observing kids. He joked: “I strolled around schoolyards with candies, and that quickly got me to the police station.” More often, he observed classroom activity. Once finished, he worried whether he had captured the flavor of a real school. In a screening for teachers, “I felt like I was going to a slaughterhouse,” but the reaction was positive.

Besides presenting the character of Lazhar, Falardeau was most interested in the touchy (pardon the pun) relationship with youngsters, including the politically correct phenomenon of banning physical contact between student and teacher. Though he understands where this trend comes from, Falardeau laments it: “The contact question in school protocols has gone too far.”

Finding Lazhar took Falardeau to France, given the lack of a good pool of Arabic actors in Canada. He first saw the actor in a YouTube video and found out that Fellag, an Algerian exile himself, had performed the play in France. This was not his typical gig, Falardeau explained: “Fellag is mostly a stand-up comedian, but, like many comics, he is unassuming.” Falardeau called him “a man who is comfortable on stage but not in public,” just right for the part. Falardeau purposely avoided emphasis on Lazhar’s immigration status, more emphasized in the play, because “he wanted to focus on the school.” Asked about Fellag as a Muslim, he answered; “It didn’t matter. I didn’t want to emphasize that,” so his religion is ignored in the screenplay.

Overall, his research and work on the film left him awed by what he saw in the classroom. “I want this film to be an Ode to Teachers,” the director concluded.