

Polisse

It has been a couple months since Hollywood doled out its Academy Awards, but film lovers probably know that other major film-making nations also honor their best. France, for example, has its annual “Césars,” which were awarded last February, and—no surprise, perhaps--“The Artist” cleaned up with six awards (see “Reviews”). Some of the other contenders have taken more time to reach our shores. One of them a terrific ensemble film, “Polisse,” garnered 13 César nominations, seven of them for individual actors in this character-rich film.

Filmed in documentary style, “Polisse” follows the members of a strongly-knit band of cops in Paris’s Children’s Protection Unit (CPU). Besides the grimness and sleaze of their work, which only involves under-age victims, these cops have to contend with their own familial and romantic travails. There is hard-charger Fred (Joeystar) who adores his sweet young daughter but is separated from his mother. There is the team of Nadine (Karin Viard), blonde and unlucky in love, and Iris (Marina Fois), single and tight as a drum. There is the team leader, the phlegmatic Baloo (Frédéric Pierott) and the thoughtful Mathieu (Nicolas Duvauchelle). There is the fiery Nora (Naidra Ayadi), a Frenchwoman of Arabic descent and the no-nonsense Sue Ellen (Emmanuelle Bercot, who also co-wrote the screenplay).

These and more must question kids of every age about the most intimate subjects (the film opens with an interview with a young girl that is wince-inducing) and likewise quiz adults about their real or potential abuses. They must also spring into action to come to the aid of kids being molested or threatened and protect them.

Adding to the documentary feel is the presence of a photographer/observer named Melissa (played by Maiween, the film’s director and co-writer) who chronicles the CPU in the same rhythm as the film itself. The cops challenge a smarmy, well-off pedophile, try to calm a raging child, arrest an abusive mother, and guffaw (yes, guffaw, there is humor, too) at a stream of double-entendres in the dead-pan presence of a young streetwalker. Through it all, the group shares divorces, affairs, family struggles, as well as unstinting mutual support and a lively round of drinks at the local bar.

American viewers of “Polisse” might find themselves comparing it to major American cop shows, like “NYPD Blue” or “Homicide,” which it, in part, resembles. The fact that it concerns child protection, however, makes it distinctive and more unsettling than its American counterparts. It almost always involves families, adults acting against children, perpetuating a violence, according to director Maiween, which is often silent, “the worst kind of violence,” she says, “inaudible violence.”

Another difference, and one that adds additional realism: the cases the unit handles are never seen to a conclusion. The cases are seen as the police see them, with initial enforcement and later gathering of evidence, but we never see what happens to the bad guys, who are dealt with in another sector. It makes for a poignant lack of closure, but a solid dose of reality. The film is not rated in the US, but it would be a hard “R” if it were, not because of blood or violence, but because of the delicacy and difficulty of its subject matter.

Maiwenn, a successful actress before she started directing in 2006, came to the project much like her photographer character. She got to know the lives of CPU police officers and observed them over time, getting to know them and, as she said in an interview “absorbing all the info I could get.” “What I wrote was based only on stories I had actually witnessed or on stories the officers told me. I changed a few things..., but I didn’t invent any of them.” What she has given the filmgoer are several moving slices of life.

As far as the title goes, director Maiwenn realized the appropriate French word “Police” had been used for another prominent film. Then, one day, her son was doing writing exercises and misspelled the word as POLISSE, and his childish handwriting struck her as obvious for the film’s subject.

(The film runs 127 minutes and is not rated, but could be considered a tough “R” for tough language and strong sexual themes).

(June 2012)