

Human Resources

Real working-class environments are relatively rare in motion pictures (writers and directors have trouble making drama out of the slog of droning factory or office work), but a new film in town with a working class environment can be unreservedly recommended. Still, you should hurry up if you want to see it, because its run may be short-lived.

Human Resources gives the kind of serious account of labor relations mostly absent in cinema. In a provincial French town, new business graduate Franck Verdeau (Jalil Lespert) comes home as a management intern to work in the factory where his father Jean Claude (Jean-Claude Vallod) has patiently put in 30 years as a machinist (the factory's exact product is kept pointedly vague).

Buoyant but naive, Franck thinks he can be a part of improving both management and labor relations, rather than having to choose one side or the other. His suggestion for a survey of employees (on the controversial new prospect of a 35-hour week) is meant as a genuine fact-finding measure, until he learns that it is just part of a company strategy to trigger layoffs--including his own father. Torn between his new management responsibilities and his family loyalties, young Franck ultimately decides to join in a union strike.

Throughout, the film shows admirable restraint in setting up a father-son confrontation that is the emotional core and high point of the film. Trying to get his stolid dad to leave his machine and join the strike, Franck reveals all his class and family anguish in admitting to his father "I'm ashamed (of you) and ashamed that I am ashamed." Their relationship is altered forever.

Decent movies about working class life are so rare that *Human Resources*, I admit, may seem even better than it is, but in the current cinema climate with so many weak products, this film stands out for its seriousness of theme and its convincing execution. The first feature-length film made by director Lauren Cantet in a semi-documentary style, *Human Resources* uses only one professional actor (Lespert) but feels utterly assured and confident. This is a solid option for the (slightly) more adventuresome filmgoer.

(October 2000)