

Science Fair

In recent years, the documentary film has discovered an almost surefire subject: kids' competitions. The compelling "Spellbound" (2002) was the first of these stories to warm filmgoers hearts, followed by the sweet "Mad Hot Ballroom" (2005) and last year's stirring "Step." You can now add to that list "Science Fair," an inspiring and wonderful true-life Revenge of the Nerds.

"Science Fair" follows nine high school students from around the world as they aim to compete in the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) sponsored by Intel. In total, this annual event in Los Angeles attracts some 1,700 of the brightest (and quirkiest) science scholars from 78 different countries seeking to become "Best in Fair."

The kids the filmmakers select are a varied and fascinating batch. There is Robbie of West Virginia, who gets lousy algebra grades but is a natural math genius with a penchant for loud shirts. Kashifa is a shy, self-effacing Muslim girl who struggles for recognition at her large sports-minded school in South Dakota. Three lively guys from Kentucky's top science school, Ryan, Harsha, and Abraham, collaborate to build an electronic 3-D stethoscope. Anjali, only 13 and a freshman, is a child prodigy at the same Louisville school as the trio and is fashioning an arsenic testing device that could save many lives.

Then there is Myllena and Gabriel, best friends and research partners from one of Brazil's poorest states (Ceara) who are studying how to identify a protein that could stem the spread of the Zika virus. Finally, there is the gawky but brilliant Ivo, who lives near the Rhine River and looks to revive the long-forgotten single-wing aircraft as a viable airship. The film also has time to focus on one inspiring mentor, Dr. Serena McCalla, a research teacher from Long Island who has built a remarkable science fair team at Jericho High School that qualified nine students for the Fair.

Unlike the other competition films mentioned above, we are not allowed into the exhibition hall to see how the judges make their decisions on the projects, though we do get to experience the tension and uplift when the winners are announced in a convention hall and cheer along with the rapt crowd.

The co-directors and co-writers of "Science Fair," Cristina Costantini and Darren Foster, have pulled off a winner in their first documentary feature. The picture is a particular triumph for Costantini, who was herself a dweeby girl in a sports-obsessed Wisconsin school, where she "found my tribe" through Science Fair. It was her own experience at ISEF, which drove her to "make a documentary about this crazy little world. It had everything--an international cast of angsty teenagers and inspiring prodigies, all devoted to one very niche subculture, and all striving to make the world a better place." Amen.

(The film contains nothing objectionable and is rated "PG," it runs 90 minutes)

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