



The Class (Entre les murs)

Spring
Season
2009

Review by Peter Bradshaw, the Guardian:

The idealistic young teacher reaching out to a troubled class of underprivileged kids - it should be the dullest movie cliché imaginable. Yet French director Laurent Cantet does something miraculous with it in this fresh piece of humanist, realist, optimist cinema, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes last year and was surely very unlucky not to get an Academy award. It is a film to be mentally positioned somewhere between Nicolas Philibert's *Être et Avoir*, about a rural infant school, and Cantet's own workplace drama, *Human Resources*. Compared to the sticky and stale fizzy drinks being served up in cinemas in the post-Oscar dead zone right now, this tastes like a glass of ice-cold water.

The Class is based on an autobiographical novel by author and former teacher François Bégaudeau, about working at a tough multi-ethnic school in the Parisian banlieux. Remarkably, Bégaudeau plays himself, or a version of himself; he does it very well, although as teaching is all about putting on a performance commanding enough to subdue the toughest audiences, maybe that shouldn't surprise us. His class of 14- to 15-year-old kids in the film is made up of non-professionals, and their unobtrusively superb and authentic classroom scenes have evidently been devised through improvisation.

Bégaudeau is François Marin, a slim, boyish thirtysomething teacher of French language and literature. We are to encounter him in the classroom, the staff-room and in the schoolyard, but never at home. We never find out about his home life or his personal life, though one pupil offers a cheeky speculation, which is to be subtly important. His sole moment of privacy is glimpsed at the very beginning of the film: having a coffee before gearing himself up for the fray. François is relatively calm, humorous and approachable, but actually a stickler for good manners and with maybe too thin a skin. Clearly, then, a good and conscientious teacher, very far from the defeatism and cynicism that has begun to drag down some of his colleagues, though it is his very informality and openness with his pupils that is to get him into trouble.



At the beginning of the year, the teachers go around introducing themselves to the new staff, and one goes through the list of pupils for one newcomer, briefing him grimly about each child: "gentil" or "pas gentil" - "nice" or "not nice" - with the latter seemingly the majority. In François's class, Esmeralda (Esmeralda Ouertani) and Koumba (Rachel Regulier) predominate: they are smart but moody, idle and subversive, and just savvy enough about François's liberal scruples to wind him up. When he chalks up examples of good and bad grammar on the blackboard, they ask pointedly why he uses Anglo-Saxon names such as "Bill" and not, say, "Rachid".

The trickiest member of the class is Souleymane (Franck Keita), a boy from Mali with family problems and a temper. Souleymane cheekily tells François that he has heard the teacher "likes men" - and insolently says that this is not his own accusation, just something he has heard. Happily, François finds a way to get through to Souleymane: he turns out to take great photos of his family on his mobile phone and François gets him to use these pictures in an autobiographical class project: it is a euphoric breakthrough. But things turn very sour when two girls are allowed to sit in on a staff discussion on standards and behaviour and gleefully report some disobliging remarks back to Souleymane, who is deeply angry and hurt after his class-project triumph, with no vocabulary to express his sense of betrayal. François himself is coldly furious at the girls' indiscretion and accuses them in class of behaving like "pétasses" - "skanks" - crucially losing his cool and compromising his authority. That crude insult ignites a violent row, which becomes toxic when François neglects to mention the "skanks" provocation in his official report. When challenged, François airily insists he was not saying that they were "skanks", merely that they were behaving as such - the same species of dishonest sophistry that Souleymane used with his "gay" jibe.

This story builds quietly, almost invisibly, through the film, and culminates in the disciplinary hearing in which Souleymane's non-French-speaking mother is present and in which the gloweringly silent and defiant pupil must translate her passionate and heartbreaking defence of him as a good boy. Like the rest of the film, this scene is natural and unforced and effortlessly persuasive, but it is the non-dramatic sequences that I somehow found the most gripping. François has a lesson in which he simply demonstrates at some length the imperfect subjunctive tense.

I could watch it all afternoon. The teacher simply dealing with all the backchat is endlessly fascinating: it is a particularly gripping kind of reality television, but a reality TV that isn't concerned with humiliation or embarrassment but with idealism, and trying to learn something.

The dog-eared trump card of this kind of movie is that the teacher learns something from the kids. It happens here - after a fashion. François is forced to leave the citadel of the classroom, the home of his authority, and descend to the level of the playground to confront Esmeralda and Koumba on the "skanks" issue. Neither side gives ground, and yet the fact that François has to argue it out on the asphalt, on equal terms, is a kind of humbling, a swallowing of pride. And in a way, François does learn something: he learns that, however vaguely he intended to use the word, for his working-class teenage pupils, "skank" means "prostitute".

The sheer lucid force of *The Class* is compelling and exhilarating. Cantet's final tableau shots of the empty classroom, like a deserted battlefield, made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. There are very few films that can claim to make their audiences into happier and smarter people. I think this could be one.