Movie Review: 'The Class' believes it has more class than it does

by Creators Syn. Movie Reviewers

Being French, "The Class" believes it has more class than it does. In fact, this pseudo-documentary doesn't have the originality of Israel's "Waltz With Bashir," the animated and horrifying memoir of that country's 1982 war with Lebanon.

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) In "The Class," a middle-school teacher wars daily with his students, an undisciplined, confrontational bunch more interested in insulting the dedicated guy standing before them than learning the fundamentals of grammar.

Based on the book by Francois Begaudeau, who spent a year in a Parisian classroom of multicultural kids and then went on to write for Playboy and the French newspaper Le Monde, the cinematic story brings to mind two great books â€” Herbert Kohl's classic "36 Children" and Jonathan Kozol's "Death at an Early Age," set in Harlem and Boston elementary schools.

More recently, on screen, there's been "American Teen," filmed at a rural Indiana high school, with its plethora of meanness and parental pressure, heartache and sex. Even Larry Clark's "Kids" and "Wassup Rockers" captured youngsters of a certain age better than "The Class."

"The Class" doesn't seem as fresh in reflecting a generation, particularly since director Laurent Cantet auditioned 3,000 teenagers to fill the classroom with just the right types â€” the shy Asian boy struggling with the language, the lanky African kid in a Detroit Pistons jersey with an explosive temper, the aggressive girl who challenges seemingly everything.

They're wild â€” "calm down!" doesn't work â€” and it's perhaps the director who told them to act that way.

"The Class" has pretensions of being a raw documentary when, in fact, it's honed and polished.

Begaudeau, who co-wrote the screenplay based on his book "Entre les Murs" (which translates to "Between the Walls"), plays himself (in the movie, his name is inexplicably changed to Mr. Marin). The film could've used the mirth of Cheech.

The best scenes take place in the teachers' lounge, the real faculty portraying themselves. One warns, "I'd like to wish the new arrivals plenty of courage." In a startling, less than believable vignette, a fledgling teacher storms into the room bellowing, "I can't take it anymore! They look right through you, they're all over each other like animals." Seems right out of a script.

Begaudeau is most real, most human, when he blurts a perceived slur aimed at a girl who kept goading him. What teacher hasn't slipped occasionally in dealing with intransigent students? "The Class" could've used more moments like that. "The Class," therefore, is dismissed.

"The Class." Rated: PG-13. Running time: 2 hours, 3 minutes. 2.5 stars.

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