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Teaching a sixth grade class whose beloved teacher has recently hung herself in the classroom, and overcoming community and government biases rooted in his immigration status are twin challenges for the teacher sensitively portrayed in 'Monsieur Lazhar.

Wisdom of the Outsider

Immigrant status and biases collide in 'Monsieur Lazhar'

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

Those of us who live in relative ease in North America and other parts of the so-called "first world" rarely pause to reflect on the silent suffering of the refugees among us -- the loved ones

they have lost or left behind, the tragedies that have shattered their hopes, the displacement that robs them of identity.

Nowhere is that experience more sensitively portrayed than in "Monsieur Lazhar," which earned a host of film

awards in Canada, an Oscar nomination for best foreign language film, and a spot at number two on my list of the best films of 2012.

Fittingly, the film tells us very little about the experience of its title charac-

ter in his home country of Algeria. When we first encounter him, he has appeared in the office of a beleaguered middle school principal to apply for the job of teaching a sixth grade class whose beloved teacher has recently hung herself in the classroom.

Lazhar is the only person to step forward to teach the devastated class, so the principal hastily accepts his report that he taught for 19 years in Algeria.

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