

Wisdom of the Outsider

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She learns nothing of his circumstances otherwise and, like most people in the film, displays little curiosity about him as he enters the life of the school.

Lazhar carries his alien status stolidly. He is courtly, a bit stiff, and his approach to the class seems at first overly formal; for example, he instructs the students to move their desks from an egalitarian semi-circle into more traditional rows, and gives them a dictation assignment from Balzac that is way over their heads.

But in time, the children relax into the structure he imposes; with it comes a kind of freedom that is missing from this typical North American school, which perceives itself as free-thinking but actually embodies its own rigidity.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the school's response to the teacher's suicide. A grief counselor is called in and bans Lazhar from her meetings with the children so as to "separate psychology from pedagogy." He is instructed not to discuss the suicide with the class and is also informed of the school's "zero tolerance" policy that forbids teachers from physical contact of any kind with students.

The school also enforces an "anti-violence" policy that forbids such playground games as "king of the hill"; as an apparent consequence, the other teachers seem to marginalize a student who acts out but is clearly struggling after being the one to discover the teacher hanging in the classroom.

All of this is supposed to be aimed at protecting the children, but it seems as though the adults are asserting their own need for protection from the implications of the violence that has been visited on the children by their trusted teacher.

Lazhar sees all this from the vantage point of the outsider, generally acquiescing with little more than a slight shake of his head to indicate his disbelief. It does not seem to occur to anyone that Lazhar might actually have had experiences that uniquely equip him to understand how to help the children.

When he gently notes in a parent-teacher conference that one of the students is perhaps overly fond of enforcing rules with her classmates, her parents icily inform him, "You are not from here so certain nuances escape you."

Perhaps. But he is not the only one who is missing nuances. Bit by bit the film reveals that Lazhar is in the midst of seeking asylum following the murder of his wife and children in Algeria. He never speaks of it outside the asylum proceedings, where he is treated not with care but with suspicion, and subjected to harsh questioning as though he is attempting to scam the Canadian government.

His classroom, though, is a safe zone, for himself and the students. One of his assignments invites them to prepare presentations about the problem of violence, which opens up space for a particularly astute student to express her grief over the violence that disrupted their classroom.

He responds to the children's

expressions of anger and confusion with patience and kindness. Small moments of attentiveness eventually lead to a larger moment of release for the troubled boy who the rest of the school has written off.

Ultimately Lazhar tells the students not to look for meaning in their teacher's death because there isn't one. But he finds ways to guide them back to their task as sixth graders, which is to emerge from a metaphorical chrysalis -- the school, their safe place -- to fly free.

His efforts get him into trouble -- and here again, his experience resounds with that of many outsiders. His wisdom not only goes unrecognized; it leads to his dismissal. The asylum proceedings are a microcosm of his experience inside the school: they culminate in the pronouncement that what he has been saying is true in the eyes of the law, not because of his testimony but because of third-party verification.

The arrogance of the proceedings, in which a smug bureaucracy deems itself qualified to pass judgment on the experience of an outsider while according no regard for his own testimony, was almost more than I could bear to watch.

But to the children, the pure of heart, this man is a gift. This lovely film offers that gift to the pure of heart among us.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column "Opinionated Judge" appears regularly in the Portland Observer. You can find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.

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