



MONSIEUR LAZHAR is the December, 2013 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. It is set in Montreal, Canada, home to the roller coaster seen above. Below is Kino Ken's review of the dvd.

MONSIEUR LAZHAR Canada 2011 color subtitled live action feature drama in French with English subtitles 94 minutes micro\_scope Productions Producers: Luc Dery, Kim McCraw, Claude Paiement

17 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Key: \* indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) indicates a juvenile performer

Points

- 2 Direction: Philippe Falardeau\*
- 2 Editing: Stephane Lafleur
- 2 Cinematography: Ronald Plante
- 0 Lighting: Marcel Breton
- 1 Story: Philippe Falardeau based on the play BASHIR LAZHAR by Evelyn de la Cheneliere
- 2 Music: Martin Leon\*, Marc Bell\*
- 2 Production Design: Emmanuel Frechette\* Set Decoration: Josee Arseneault\*
- 2 Sound: Mathieu Beaudin, Sylvain Bellemare, Bernard Gariepy Strobl
- 2 Acting

## 2 Creativity

17 total points

Chief Cast: Mohamed Fellag (Bachir Lazhar), Sophie Nelisse\* (j) (Alice L'Ecuyer), Emilien Neron\* (j) (Simon), Marie-Eve Beauregard\*(j) (Marie-Frederique), Vincent Millard (j) (Victor, of Chilean descent), Seddik Benslimane (j) (Abdelmalek), Louis-David Leblanc\* (j) (Boris, migraine sufferer), Gabriel Verdier (j) (Jordan), Marianne Soucy-Lord\* (j) (Shanel), Danielle Proulx (Madame Vaillancourt, principal), Brigitte Poupart (Claire, a teacher), Jules Philip\* (Gaston, gym teacher), Louis Champagne (Concierge at school), Daniel Gadouas (Gilbert Danis), Francine Ruel (Madame Dumas), Sophie Sanscartier (Audrey, veteran old-school teacher), Nicole-Sylvie Lagarde (Psychologist), Andre Robitaille\* (Commissioner), Marie Charlebois (Quebec Attorney-General), Evelyne de la Cheneliere\* (Alice's mother), Stephane Demers\* (Father of Marie-Frederique), Nathalie Costa\* (Mother of Marie-Frederique), Judith Baribeau (English professor), Jose Arandi (Judo Professor), Helena Laliberte (Martine Lachance, suicidal teacher)

How do you deal with grief when no one around you wants to address your unhappiness directly? Is mourning best left to solitude? Is there such a thing as a helpful lie to expedite healing? These are the kinds of questions raised by the Canadian film MONSIEUR LAZHAR and the monologue play on which it is based. Thanks to casting associates Emmanuelle Beaugrand-Champagne, Nathalie Boutrie and Constance Demontoy and their brilliant selections of juvenile leads, MONSIEUR LAZHAR pulls viewers into a lamentable situation triggered by the public suicide of popular teacher Martine Lachance in her Montreal elementary school classroom. Though this sounds like the basis of a melodramatic telefilm plot derived from current tabloid headlines, it is actually an inspired work of fiction. Director Philippe Falardeau opens up a monologue play into a richly layered psychological study of how such an incident infiltrates the innocence of childhood and creates enduring, though masked, pain.

At the film's opening, Simon and Alice, two sixth-grade chums, appear in a scene of playground teasing. They seem happy, wrapped up in their private universe, disconnected from energetic games or gossipy conversations of peers. But when Simon reenters school to fetch milk for his class, a parent's nightmare occurs. One brief glance into Martine Lachance's classroom, followed by a second, more determinate stare, tosses Simon's world into stunned uncertainty. For he has witnessed something unspeakable, a suicide victim hanging in what is supposed to be a safety zone for children. Dropping his wire basket of milk cartons to the floor, the boy races off to find an adult to inform.

Most incoming students are successfully herded back to the playground by concerned teaching staff. But Alice ignores instructions, breaks free from reversing lines of children, moves hesitatingly down the restricted corridor to her classroom. There she allows herself a peek into forbidden territory. She, too, is exposed to the horrific scene which so totally shattered Simon's dedication to duty. In her case, though, the witness is a willing one. Though Alice probably had no sense of what she was about to confront.

What follows is the usual blitz of media questioning and defensive counselling pitting reporters against school personnel. Falardeau elects to show only the consequences of this ongoing battle, leaving the audience free to imagine daily pressures faced by students as they approach and exit their school. A place of learning where young minds can explore and ask questions has become a beleaguered fortress of denial and evasiveness. Into this clouded atmosphere breezes a charming, seemingly naïve opportunist from Algeria, who uses his late wife's teaching credentials and publicity from news accounts of the local tragedy to land himself a pedagogic position in Madame Vaillancourt's now infamous institution. Unable to find anyone else willing to step into the vacancy left by Martine, Principal Vaillancourt grudgingly accepts Bachir Lazhar's offer to serve as her replacement. She is so desperate to restore everyday routine that even investigation disclosing Lazhar's deceptions fails to prevent acceptance of his proposition.

So the Algerian refugee passes from restaurant owner to teacher /counsellor, in the process permitting old wounds to reopen and repeatedly transgressing

school rules and privacy protocols. Unlike Canadian natives, he hails from a nation racked by violent bloodshed. Convinced by reading his wife's manuscript that reconciliation by itself is an inadequate basis for renewal, Bashir is determined that history should not repeat itself in his potential adoptive country. He sees more clearly than anyone other than Alice that Simon is a slowly burning fuse which, left unattended will blow up and bring devastating damage to anyone nearby when the explosion occurs.

Since Bashir has no formal training in educational psychology or instructional techniques, he reverts his charges to the formal dictation exercises and obligatory immersion in classic literature which molded his own childhood learning experiences. Gradually, the untrained pedant becomes an observant facilitator of child interaction with both environment and curriculum.

A most important lesson he imparts is awareness of the past and its influence. For children naturally inclined to dwell only in the unfolding present, Bashir's insistence on examining yesterday's relics is a challenge. Can they together find closure on events that haunt them?

Bashir has lost wife and daughter to terrorism. Victor's kin includes a man who, after political torture, went mad and destroyed himself. Alice pines for a restoration of school's relaxed atmosphere of cultural acceptance. None of these deprivations can be reversed.

But they may yet, working together, save one soul from a crushing load of guilt. Simon is being devoured by self-loathing and cannot find a constructive outlet for it alone. Given a choice between ostracism and confrontation, his friend Alice first opts for the former. Simon reacts by growing more taciturn and vehemently aggressive than before. Realizing that path is a dead end, the even-tempered girl morphs into an emotional copy of her miserable pal, accusing him of insensitivity and self-centeredness. In a scene worthy of comparison to the faceoff between the Henry Fonda and Lee J. Cobb characters in *TWELVE ANGRY MEN*, Alice penetrates Simon's defenses with tart tongue, bringing him to tearful release of his unshared burden. Simon finally begins to let go of the notion a rebuff of his personal tutor's comforting hug directly led to her death.

One parallel plot concentrates on Bashir's campaign to obtain political persecution status, which, if successful, would allow him to remain in Canada

rather than face deportation to his homeland. The Algerian immigrant must also let go of the chains tying him to the past, an undertaking just as daunting as the children's uphill struggle to find a healthy healing process.

The solution of letting children air doubts, despondencies and recriminations is not an easy one for adults to accept. Principal Vaillancourt's job may fall victim to intransigent insistence on skirting the main issue. Parents who disdain to discuss unpleasant events in the lives of offspring only add to their problems, rather than solving them. For the community needs to cooperate in reintegrating youths into socially responsible living. That will only happen if lines of communication remain open. The unpleasant truth must be valued more than the consoling lie.

This reviewer taught in elementary schools for nineteen years and can confirm the authenticity of classroom interchanges, dynamics and staff conversations. None of the children utter a preposterous phrase or inappropriate sentence. Their faces consistently mirror what can be found in every elementary school classroom.

What makes the film unusually powerful is less the story than the degree to which performers sink themselves into their roles. Director Falardeau appears to have tremendous rapport with both adult and child actors. He elicits performances that are not just admirable, but thoroughly engrossing. Among the standouts are Sophie Nelisse, required at times by the script to be a little too emotionally precocious, but offsetting that with small facial gestures that convey the actual feeling of the moment in undiluted potency. Emilien Neron manages to make what could have become a stereotypical juvenile delinquent into a thoroughly convincing portrait of a troubled youngster mistakenly cutting loose from needed alliances. There's a rapport between Simon and Alice that probably extends offscreen as well. Just as incisive is Marie-Eve Beauregard's portrayal of Marie-Frederique, who probably lost teacher's pet status on the demise of Martine and finds herself overshadowed by the less abrasive Alice when Bachir takes command. Likewise, the youngster playing migraine-sufferer Boris, who is eventually prodded back into motivated research by Bachir, is also memorably sympathetic, thanks to the understated acting of Louis-David LeBlanc. Also standing out in a generally superior cast are young Marianne Soucy-Lord, whose Shanel is ushered all too soon off the screen, Andre Robitaille as the

overtaxed Commissioner dealing with asylum-seekers, Jules Philip as a charmingly waggish gym instructor, Evelyne de la Cheneliere as Alice's less-than-omnipresent mother, and the icy duo of Stephane Demers and Nathalie Costa as parents of know-it-all Marie-Frederique.

Stephane Lafleur's editing is exemplary, showing us shadings of facial expressions that many others would rush over to streamline action. Instead, Lafleur focusses on character nuance in the film, which is displayed on faces even more fully than through gestures. Scenes are invariably cut before they grow stale. Graphic gore and fighting are minimally represented.

Cinematographer Ronald Plante conveys the chilliness of Canadian playgrounds and hockey rinks equally authoritatively with cozily pastel interiors. His camera locks onto the right faces at the proper moments, not always easy in a roomful of potential showboats. There are splendid treasures here, as when the Abdelmalek character finds TINTIN IN TIBET more fascinating than Alice's oral recitation, and the scene where a dawdling Simon suddenly galvanizes into action, shoving milk cartons in vigorous unconcern for symmetry or balance into a carrying basket. Overhead scenes of youngsters at play in a snow-coated playground shoehorn spectators immediately into the half-forgotten world of recess games.

A recurrent thematic melody sustains ambience of threatened innocence throughout the film. Martin Leon and Marc Bell, for the most part, have composed charmingly low-key music, often conveyed solely by piano. Quite appropriate for an elementary school setting. Only the Algerian dance of Bashir seems a bit forced, more like a compulsory nod to political correctness than an integrated component of the film's assimilation theme.

Philippe Falardeau's screenplay opens out the original source monologue enormously, utilizing incisive dialogues and refreshing changes of scenery from post office to apartments, with visits to a hockey rink and a hearing room adding welcome diversity. There are quite a few memorable lines present also, some coming from Balzac himself.

A commendable cornucopia of scholastic detail is observable, the work of production designer Emmanuel Frechette and set decorator Josee Arseneault. Whether a papier—mache history project, or student drawings and paintings happily coexisting with maps, globes, photographs and manuscript reports, all the

paraphernalia of modern instruction is vividly displayed on corridor walls and schoolroom bulletin boards. Looks quite real and very formidable.

Lighting's a continual problem, however. Too often something appears on screen which the camera ever so briefly lingers on. Before the object can be properly identified, it disappears, leaving the viewer baffled and dissatisfied, hoping it is not of critical value.

On the other hand, sound recording captures crunching snow, splashing water, music floating through the air from a neighboring apartment, the scrape of desks on a plank floor and a host of other noises with marvelous fidelity. This is due to the sonic expertise of a team headed by Mathieu Beaudin and Sylvain Bellemare.

The dvd release of MONSIEUR LAZHAR includes several bonus features, an illuminating FROM STAGE TO SCREEN featurette, absolutely essential audition tapes for the "Alice" and "Simon" characters, a completely disposable larking interview with the director and extended versions of Bachir's Story and Alice's Report.

MONSIEUR LAZHAR is not a suitable film for anyone under the age of 18. It is an admirable powerhouse drama for adults, with engaging characters, intelligent screenplay, superior production design, finely-calibrated sound recording, and well-chosen edits. Highly recommended for fans of wrenching film dramas and less-than-idyllic conclusions.