



# ADVOCATE *insider*

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## **Cannes Day Ten: New York, Teaching Kids and Some Bad Magic**

Synecdoche, New York -- Oscar-winning screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's directorial debut is a typically convoluted, high concept tale about a theatrical director (Philip Seymour Hoffman) whose wife (Catherine Keener) runs off to Berlin with their daughter and becomes a famous painter (while their daughter grows up off screen, gets a full body tattoo and starts dating Jennifer Jason Leigh). Hoffman gets a MacArthur grant and heads to New York City where he finds a huge warehouse and builds a full-scale replica of the city and populates it with actors playing himself and everyone in his life and directs them all, along with ultimately millions of others. They rehearse this play for decades while outside the warehouse the world seems to descend into chaos. I'm always aware it's an artificial construct rather than getting caught up in the tale, though affecting moments -- like Diane Weist speaking into Hoffman's ear via mike and directing him, Tom Noonan hovering over Hoffman while studying Hoffman and so on -- can be found. Only for devoted fans, I think. The critic next to me was surprised no one booed it. Generally gets mixed notices.

The Class/Entre Les Murs -- After an amusing press conference for the documentary about the Chelsea Hotel by Abel Ferrara, I realize that one of the last two films in Competition is playing at noon and rush into a very crowded screening (it's playing the next morning at 8:30 am and many people will be gone or, like me, don't want to get up that early. Directed by Laurent Cantet, it's based on a best-selling nonfiction novel by Francois Begaudeau, a teacher who documented one year at a tougher (ie poorer) Paris junior high school filled with kids from all different races and backgrounds. Begaudeau is also the star of the film, which takes place entirely in the school. Cantet is one of the best and least heralded directors working today, with

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several good to great films to his credit: Human Resources, Time Out, Heading South and now this. In fact, "The Class" is probably my favorite film in Competition. Subtle, funny and emotional, it's got a cast of kids equal to the kids who appeared in season four of HBO's "The Wire," which was also set in a school. As with Il Divo, I might not remember all their names but I know six or so of these kids (in a class of 24) very very well and the teacher most of all. He's clearly dedicated and smart, gently butting heads with another teacher who always wants to enforce the rules and sees the kids as the enemy. This description is already blunter and less shaded than the film itself, which has no villains or heroes (not even our teacher) and is always willing to look deeper to empathize with all the characters. Some of the teachers snap under the pressure of trying to educate unruly kids who talk back and see no future and therefore no reason to learn. We see teacher meetings and parent-teacher conferences and disciplinary hearings but above all our teacher in his classroom with these kids, teaching them grammar and writing. His constant balancing act of trying to hear them out and let them express themselves naturally without losing control of the class is engrossing in and of itself. And the kids are so vivid. One smart girl with a wicked tongue always challenges the teacher ("Why do you always use such white names?" she said when he puts a sentence on the board that begins "Bill likes..." "Why not Ahmed?") (In a sign of how subtle and real the film is, I really liked this girl while my friend Stephen couldn't stand her and thought she was a troublemaker.) A cute gay kid who is always hanging out with the other girls. The new kid Carl who was kicked out of another school for misbehaving. Boubacar, who loves football/soccer, and can be cajoled into contributing after making a funny comment. Wei, a sweet, friendly Asian kid. The girl who feels the professor has it in for her and says she's going to sit in the back and not speak to him for the rest of the year. And Soulemane, a student who constantly gets into trouble with other teachers and who Francois really makes an effort to encourage -- praising a self-portrait done with photographs, dealing with his parents and so on. Heartbreakingly, an offhand comment in a teacher's meeting (where student representatives attend) gets back to Soulemane, which shames him and leads to a cascading series of events where everyone -- including the teacher -- makes tragic mistakes. A film like this makes "Dead Poets Society" and "To Sir With Love" and "Blackboard Jungle" seem simplistic in comparison. It deals with gender and class and intelligence and immigrants vs citizens in the most natural, unaffected way by simply looking carefully at these characters. Gripping, moving, and painfully real, it's surely the film to turn

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Cantet into a director with a worldwide audience.

My Magic -- Following "The Class" is no easy task, and this Singaporean film dumped at 4:30 p.m. on Friday certainly isn't up to it. The most entertaining part of the movie is getting in: they don't admit the journalists until the lights are down and they're herded into the balcony. The balcony is dangerously steep and extremely dark -- you can literally be ready to sit in a seat without realizing it's already taken. All the journalists pull out their cell phones in the vain hope that the tiny light emitted by the screen will glow enough to give them a sense of where they are. It doesn't, but you do get to see the vivid image of all those phones waving frantically in the air like some sort of spastic rock concert where a line of fans heads up into the rafters. The film itself should not be in Competition. A small slot in a smaller fest category might be kind for a movie from a country that makes so few films, but even there it would need a generous audience. It's the story of a giant man, a drunkard, who comes home hopelessly ill every night after weepingly calling his ex-wife. Their little son cleans him up, angry and confused. The boy does homework for other students so they can have a little money, while the father just busses tables and gets wasted again and again. The dad also casually does magic tricks and feats of skin piercing because he has an exceptional tolerance of pain. When the boy isn't cleaning up vomit, he's sitting on his grandmother's grave crying and saying he misses her and is angry at his mother and father. The dad gets the not-so-bright idea of getting himself beat to death by thugs who will pay for the pleasure, thus giving his orphaned son a chance at a better life. Ugh.

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