

Synopsis

François and his fellow teachers prepare for a new year at a high school in a tough neighbourhood. Armed with the best intentions, they brace themselves to not let discouragement stop them from trying to give the best education to their students.

Cultures and attitudes often clash in the classroom, a microcosm of contemporary France. As amusing and inspiring as the teenaged students can be, their difficult behaviour can still jeopardise any teacher's enthusiasm for the low-paying job.

François insists on an atmosphere of respect and diligence. Neither stuffy nor severe, his extravagant frankness often takes the students by surprise. But his classroom ethics are put to the test when his students begin to challenge his methods...

Interview with Laurent Cantet and François Bégaudeau

1) In the Beginning (Film Style)

Laurent Cantet: I came up with the idea of doing a film about life in a junior high school. Very quickly, the project defined itself to never leave the establishment's enclosure. At the time, more and more people were speaking about making a 'sanctuary' of schools. I wanted to show the opposite: a sounding board, a microcosm of the world, where issues of equality or inequality regards to opportunity, work and power, cultural and social integration and exclusion - play out concretely. Of note, I had developed a scene about disciplinary counselling, which I saw as a kind of junior high 'black box'. At the time of *Heading South's* release, I met François who was presenting his new book, *Entre les murs* (*Between the Walls*) at that time. His discourse was a counterattack to the indictment on today's schools: for once, a professor was not writing in order to get back at adolescents presented as savages or idiots. I read the book, and I immediately had the feeling that it would add to my initial project in two ways: first, material, the documentary support it needed, and which I set off to create myself by going to spend some time in a junior high school. Secondly, I was inspired by the character of François, by his direct relationship with his students. He summarised and incarnated the different aspects of teachers that I had first imagined.

François Bégaudeau: The aim of my book was to document one school year, sticking close to daily experiences. So there was no clear narrative line, no fictional plot centred on any one particular event. There were disciplinary meetings, but they were mostly events among many which followed their course. With this material, Laurent and his co-screenwriter Robin Campillo extracted the storyline that they were interested in. My book was the result of situations; Laurent and Robin chose some of these to mould into fictional form. They did not choose 'characters' in the strict sense of the term; they constructed them, sometimes by grafting together several kids from the book.

Laurent Cantet: We did not want our narrative thread to be obvious immediately. We wanted the characters to develop progressively without really seeing them coming. The film is firstly a story of life in a classroom, the life of a classroom: a community of 25 people who did not choose one another, but who have been called upon to be together and work together between four walls for an entire year. Souleymane is first seen as merely another student of this classroom, equal to the others. After an hour of chronicle, a story takes shape and he is the centre of it. Only in retrospect do we realise that everything was already in place before.

Laurent Cantet: We wrote an initial summary, a backbone of the film, destined to be irrigated and modified throughout the year of preparation according to a plan I had already tried out in *Resources humaines* (*Human Resources*). The idea was to use an existing school and during the filmmaking process, to integrate all the players of academic life. The first door that we knocked on was that of the Françoise Dolto Junior High in Paris' 20th Arrondissement. It was the right one (we would have filmed there, if the school wasn't undergoing construction). All the adolescents of the film are students at Dolto; all the teachers teach there, including Julie Athénil who is the counsellor and Mr. Simonet is the assistant principal. With the exception of Souleymane's mother, whose role is the most fabricated; the parents in the film are those of the students in real life.

2) Born Actors

Laurent Cantet: Work with the adolescents began in November 2006 and lasted until the end of the school year. During the course of the year, a class took shape. The characters of the original script, who existed only because of the situations that they could generate, became more defined. The young Chinese boy in the book, for example, interested me because of his still fragile French skills and for the episode of his parents' deportation. But the Wei in the film owes a lot to the boy who plays him. For example, we did not write a word of his self-portrait nor the passage where he explains how he feels shame for others.

Laurent Cantet (continued): We used a whole spectrum of processes; depending to what extent the characters were constructed fictionally. Arthur, the gothic kid, for example, was not foreseen in the script. But a few weeks before the shoot, the costume designer came to investigate their closets. She asked if one of them wanted to become gothic. Arthur threw himself into the idea. I guess he wanted to live out something that he didn't dare. He took the plunge in fiction..

François Bégaudeau: Most of the adolescents are created characters. At the end of the film, you think: 'these kids are fantastic, but they are not really actors, they're natural because they are just playing their lives'. Nothing could be farther from the truth!

Laurent Cantet: During the workshop improvisations, we tried to push the students as far as possible to see if they could handle this or that scene. One day, I asked Carl to be very aggressive towards his teacher, and he proposed a scene of unexpected violence. A few seconds later, I suggested another situation: he has come from another junior high school where he had been kicked out; here he wants to pass for a nice kid. Instantly, he created a quiet character, intimidated by François. The scene is actually in the film.

François Bégaudeau: When it came to filming the scene at the end of the class, where Khoumba and I are arguing, we told Rachel, who plays the part: 'be a real pain'. So sweet and kind in real life, but she still responded to the request.

Laurent Cantet: The one who went the farthest in creating his role is certainly Franck (Souleymane in the film). He's a very reserved, sweet guy, the exact opposite of the character. We had to fabricate with him this tough guy image. With each scene, he surprised me with the violence which he showed himself capable of. As for Esmeralda, she is Esmeralda: monolithic, perfectly at ease with power plays and conflict, which still didn't stop her from integrating all the instructions that I gave her.

François Bégaudeau: Along with the ease for improvisation, once a scene was discovered, they were able to re-create it identically with incredibly natural and precise acting. School takes their savoir-faire and refines it, perhaps because school is a continual invitation to play a role, to dissimulate, to cheat. The worst students often have this very talent, because they have to compensate for their difficulties with chatter, lying, and make-believe.

Laurent Cantet: When I ask a junior high school student to play a junior high school student, a teacher to play a teacher, I do not expect that they will express themselves as they are. During the improvisation workshops, they reflected together on the different stakes of the scenes, using this occasion to question their own teaching techniques, or contesting sometimes my proposals. This is one of the most exciting phases of the filmmaking process.

3) The Dialogue (Language and debate)

Laurent Cantet: The adolescents never had a script to hand. We noticed that when they improvised according to requested situations, they were able to come up with their own dialogue: certain exchanges, certain expressions, which François had in his book - as if it were a matter of archetypes of language and their preoccupations.

François Bégaudeau: Most films about adolescents show them as monosyllabic. For us, without doubt, the dominant force of *The Class* is the loquacious and lively adolescent, rather than melancholic and inhibited. Each spectator is free to imagine Esmeralda daydreaming alone in her room, but the film only shows her in the classroom, where her presence makes her a pure slice of life. All the students are susceptible to masterful moments of talk, but this can be derailed at any moment. Not only for the students, but also for the teacher.

Laurent Cantet: The entire film is constructed around language. I wanted to film those incredible oratory moments that are so frequent in a classroom, where relevance or strength of position doesn't matter much and what counts above all is to have the last word. This is a game at which adolescents excel, a sort of no-exit rhetoric into which the teachers are often pulled in as well. Above all, there are those frequent misunderstandings that lead to no one understanding each other, or understanding just half of what is said. For example, the equivocation behind the meaning of the word 'skank' sets off a conflict. Or the one word too much from François during the staff meeting - the 'academically limited' boy becomes a simply unacceptable 'limited' from the mouths of the class delegates - which will lead Souleymane to a disciplinary meeting.

4) How Things Work (Filming)

Laurent Cantet: I wanted the shoot to continue the improvisational work of the workshops, with the same freedom. HD was indispensable. I already noticed while shooting *Human Resources* that the cost and weight of a 35mm camera left little room for improvisation. For *The Class*, I wanted to be able to shoot continuously for 20 minutes, even when nothing was happening, because I knew it would take only a sentence to start things up again. For the classroom scenes, François begins with a specific subject. We explained the situation to the two or three students featured in the scene, giving them some turning points. As for the others, they discovered what was going on bit by bit during the take. François guided the scene like a classroom, and I intervened during the takes, honing in on the scene, asking one person to be more precise, asking another to respond to a retort, etc. Each time, it was amazing to see them take off again instantly, with the same energy that they had before I interrupted them, while integrating perfectly my suggestions.

François Bégaudeau: Obviously, this kind of attack is especially adequate for a classroom scene, because a teacher is realistically expected to let his students speak out and even provoke them at the right moments. It's the same thing, of course, with the parents of the students. I had in mind Laurent's suggested framework and I found a way to get to the heated moments which we needed.

Laurent Cantet: I was quickly convinced that what we planned to do would require three cameras: a first, always on the teacher; a second, on the student at the centre of the scene, and a third prepared for digressions: a chair losing balance, a girl cutting her friend's hair, a daydreaming student who suddenly catches up to what is going on. But we had to be able to anticipate sudden outbursts, little sensitive events

that could turn around a scene. The classroom where we shot was square. We transformed it into a rectangular room, adding a technical corridor of two or three metres. The three cameras were on the same side, always facing the same way: the teacher to the left, the students to the right. We are very rarely facing the actors head on. The idea was to film the course as a tennis match, which required putting the teacher and students in an equal position. I faced the three monitors and I signalled to the cameramen to go this way or that when I believed something might happen. Along with François, we slowly learned to gauge a student's reaction, so as to make sure that the camera would be ready. The way in which François guided each interior scene, after we had discussed together the aims and results, required an understanding that one rarely sees between actor and director (in general, the actor does what the director wants him to) and even rarely between a scriptwriter and a director.

5) Intelligence at Stake: (Conflict) and or Education

Laurent Cantet: I wanted to do justice to all the work that goes on in the school environment. In a classroom, intelligence is always at stake - even in misunderstandings and confrontations. It is this intelligence that we aimed for each time we started a scene. Ideas are put under question, understood or moved in the dialogue exchange between teacher and students, between students themselves. This way of placing all bets on intelligence corresponded to the very particular and not very orthodox way that François practices his profession.

François Bégaudeau: We set up the scenes to begin with classic moments of transmitting knowledge: prose style, the subjunctive tense, Anne Frank, etc. Then the class discussion deviates. As a teacher, I openly recognise these deviations. But there is still the 'artistic effect' in this film as in the book. Upon the release of the book, people often told me: 'Your classes are so lively!' But this was because I just kept the most animated moments for the book's sake. When everyone stops speaking, there are no scenes. In the morning class between 8 and 9, when the students sleep, there is nothing to see and nothing to tell.

Laurent Cantet: Those moments where the class discussion deviated are the ones that interested me the most, and the film is built on them. Few teachers take as many risks with their students: the risk to fall off track, the risk to fail. It is obviously easier to say that one has successfully transmitted this or that piece of knowledge through a lecture than by some induced method. This requires a sang-froid for which many people would criticise François, and for which many people would envy him. When the teacher speaks to the students as he would to adults, that might seem tough, but it's often more insulting if he had handled them with kid gloves. François is not shy about open confrontation with his students and that seems completely respectful to me because they are considered as worthwhile interlocutors. His teaching technique consists of digging into students, even when it might be painful, to show them their reasoning is too short to be acceptable as it is. If you're wondering about democracy in the classroom, it is in these moments that it exists.

François Bégaudeau: My character was constructed, of course. But in some sequences, I speak up wholly as the teacher I am. I can refer to the scene in which Souleymane asks me if I am a homosexual. Most teachers would have cut the discussion short or immediately written a bad note to the parents in his daily report card. As for me, I look forward to such occasions. I see an opportunity to get something out of it: act like Socrates, cast away the archaic views of the student in question. The egalitarian contract is there: I can tease you, but I must accept that at any moment, you might throw sarcasm at me or even call me a fag.

6) No One is Entirely at Fault: A Morality Play?

Laurent Cantet: There was no question of making François into a superhero. When one takes risks, things can go wrong, misunderstandings can be provoked. During the first takes of the playground scene, François was too in command of the situation. I asked him to forget the storyline, to be destabilised, because he knows that he has made a mistake and also because he is in the minority. In confrontations, the teacher is not always the master of the game. In class, the teacher poses questions which cut to the bone, but the students also have questions which give him a hard time. I can refer in particular to the scene where he answers that the difference between written and spoken language is a question of intuition. He is seen at the end of his arguments, assaulted by a chain of questions which he is expected to answer.

François Bégaudeau: There's also the moment when he says, after asking the students to make their self-portraits: 'Your life is interesting'. Pedagogically, there is reason to say this. But Angelica responds: 'I don't think our life interests you that much.' She's right too! Everyone is right in this story.

Laurent Cantet: The same is also true for teachers when they discuss their techniques. When they discuss the necessity of the disciplinary meeting for Souleymane, for example, their starting point is clear: Souleymane will be expelled. But this does not constitute any certainty. On the contrary, nobody seems sure of what they are saying: one affirms one thing, the next one adds nuance with another sentence, so much so that what was just said now sounds uncertain. I like to show in 'real time' how true reflections come about. This scene also allows us to blur the line between François and the other teachers. François is part of a group discussion; he is not against the others, he is among the others.

François Bégaudeau: These moments are suspended between two conditions: on one hand, the teacher does not always create a successful plan, and on the other hand, one knows very well that in the end, the sorting machine gets the job done. But it's true that they play a big role in the pleasure I have always gotten out of teaching. Or more finding myself in a room with thirty kids, and to try to reflect with them. It's a close race.

Laurent Cantet: The equality pact between teacher and students is broken in the last third of the film, around the affair of the disciplinary meeting, with all it suggests about hierarchy and authority. But it is not completely annulled. Because the entire film has shown a functioning Utopia. Not a theoretical view nor an affirmation of what a school should be, but a description of what it sometimes is. And then the moment comes when Utopia bumps into an even bigger machine, against something that resembles what is happening outside the walls. This does not stop the fact that something has taken place.

François Bégaudeau: A school constantly creates wonderful situations. But we all know at the same time that it is, in the end, discriminatory, unequal, etc. This tension was at the basis of the film. More generally, I find the same kind of tension in my favourite films. **In the present of each scene,** there is so much energy at work that everyone is saved. But the progression of the screenplay takes us to rupture, impossibility and catastrophe. Each situation is a Utopia, but the sum of the situations is tragic. This is exactly the case in Laurent's film. We can see in it the story of a failure. On the other hand, we can retain moments of a concrete Utopia.