

Monsieur Lazhar

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue

Movies about education are seldom convincing; their depiction of what goes on in the classroom hardly ever tallies with our own experiences of the bumps and leaps in the learning process or of the teachers who affected our lives. So the sweet and poignant Quebecois film *Monsieur Lazhar*, about an Algerian refugee who spends a few months teaching at an elementary school in Montreal, is a rare pleasure.

Writer-director Philippe Falardeau begins with the intersection of two tragedies. A sixth-grade teacher dies suddenly, and the principal (Danielle Proulx) is at a loss to find an immediate replacement mid-year. So when an Algerian immigrant named Bachir Lazhar (Mohamed Fellag, in a performance of tremendous charm) presents himself in her office, claiming to have pedagogical experience in his homeland, she hires him pretty much on the spot. What she doesn't know is that he's not a permanent resident but a widowed refugee applying for political asylum.

Bachir teaches by instinct, and his old-world graciousness and traditionalism at first puzzle the children and then fascinate them. His fellow teachers are drawn to his warmth and generosity of spirit. But the rules that restrict 21st-century teachers—the caution with which they're ordered to approach their students physically, the way they're supposed to paper over their observations about their pupils with cheery platitudes when they discuss their progress with their parents—befuddle him. And his experience with loss and grief runs counter to the strict instructions he gets from the principal to avoid talking to the students about their previous teacher's death; that task is left to the school psychologist, whose assessment of their psychic progress Bachir finds convenient and implausible.

The entire ensemble is excellent, including Brigitte Poupart and Jules Philip as Bachir's colleagues, but Falardeau does his most remarkable work with the young actors. The children are as unself-conscious and naturally funny as the schoolboys in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. (It's clear, in fact, that in some scenes Falardeau has Truffaut in mind.) Émilien Néron is remarkably good as a boy named Simon, as is Sophie Nélisse as Simon's friend Alice, whose anger at him fuels an explosion in

Bachir's classroom. Alice, the most outspoken child in the class, becomes Bachir's most devoted student. In one lovely interlude, he opens her desk while she and the others are out at recess and finds she's taped up a photo of Algiers with a heart scribbled on it.

A conventional filmmaker would paint the principal, Vaillancourt, as an unthinking rulemonger and the gym teacher, Gaston (Philip), as the sexist boor he comes across as in his first few scenes. But Vaillancourt struggles with the social and legal demands of her job, which she doesn't believe in, and when Gaston tells a story about his own son both his sensitivity and his sensibility shine through. *Monsieur Lazhar* is modest, but it has depth of both feeling and observation. It earns our respect as well as our affection by never stooping to fakery.