







THE CLASS

Directed by Laurent Cantet

A Sony Pictures Classics Release

2008 Cannes Film Festival : Winner of the Palme D'Or

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Synopsis

François and his fellow teachers prepare for a new year at a high school in a tough neighborhood. 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 behavior can still jeopardize 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...



An Interview with Laurent Cantet and François Bégaudeau

by Philippe Mangeot

In the Beginning

Laurent Cantet. Just before making *Vers le sud* (*Heading South*), 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 - in regards to opportunity, work and power, cultural and social integration and exclusion - play out concretely. Of note, I had developed a scene about disciplinary counseling, 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 summarized 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 centered around 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 mold 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 center of it. Only in retrospect do we realize that everything was already in place before.

François Bégaudeau. During the writing of the script, I intervened mostly as a fact checker. Some episodes might have worked fine in the narrative sense, but they seemed improbable to me in the real world of the school system. So I suggested adjustments.

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 *Ressources 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 in the film are students at Dolto ; all the teachers teach there, including Julie Athénol is the counselor 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.



Born Actors

Laurent Cantet. Work with the adolescents began in November 2006 and lasted until the end of the school year. We ran open workshops every wednesday afternoon, and all the kids of the fourth and third level (ages 13-15) could participate. Not counting those who came just once, we saw some fifty students. Almost all the ones who make up the class in the film are the ones who stayed with us for the entire year. The others dropped out on their own.

François Bégaudeau. 25 out of 50 is far from what's often heard in terms of adolescent castings : "We screened 3000 kids and finally found a star." But actually, there are a few stars pretty much everywhere.

Laurent Cantet. During the course of the year, a class took shape. François participated in all the workshops. We progressively learned how to get to know the students, searching in them what we could use to graft onto the skeletons

that we proposed. 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 Wey in the film owes a lot to the boy who plays him. For example, we did not write a word of his selfportrait nor the passage where he explains how he feels shame for others.

François Bégaudeau. In the book, Ming is very studious. He hardly spoke because he is so concentrated and because he is insecure about his French. Wey, in contrast, is supertalkative. In the first workshops, he went into half-hour monologues, without a single complex about his hardly perfect bilingual ability.

Laurent Cantet. 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. I took this choice even further by asking his mother to make an issue of it in her discussion with his teacher.

That was actually the only encounter that I really guided. The other parents proposed their own themes, projecting onto the characters the expectations which they really have for their children.



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 toward 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. We totally transformed his look, to the point that, in the first fittings, he felt like he was in disguise. Actually, his costumes helped him slip into the character. 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. I think specifically of the delivery she gives of Plato's *The Republic*. On the eve of the shooting, François spoke to her about this

book which she had evidently not read. Before rolling the camera, I asked her to evoke Socrates as if she knew him personally. From the first take, she gave an interpretation of the book that was both precise and incomplete. I was very moved, which must be what teachers feel in such moments.



François Bégaudeau. Along with the ease for improvisation, I would also like to point out that once a scene was discovered, they were able to re-create it identically with incredibly natural and precise acting. Whether it was the students or the teachers, I never had the feeling that anyone froze when acting. Pialat once said that we forget that people are "acting hogs" (his expression). This is particularly the case with the adolescents in this film, and perhaps true of all those of their generation. 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, 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. I am very fond of the idea of recreation, of the representation of the self that acting implies. Characters can be constructed based on the images that actors have of themselves, on their way of speaking, their way of being. The teachers, for example, were like the students, early on involved in the elaboration of their characters. 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. This part has always had something a bit mysterious about it. I never measure the exact part of what I induce, so once a scene is shot, it is always hard for me to know who contributed what.



The Dialogue

Laurent Cantet. The adolescents never had a script in 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 a 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. *The Class* deals with how the lacunae of language affect everyone. 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. Sometimes there's a linguistic jubilation, even if what the characters are saying does not grammatically conform to what the teacher expects of them. Then one minute later, they can no longer be able to express themselves : "I know what I want to say, but I don't have the words."



François Bégaudeau. We are constantly going from fluidity to impotence, and vice versa. In its own way, the film refuses generalities : neither lamentations about the supposed deficits of adolescent language, nor idealized marvel about the formidable genius of "those people."

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.



How Things Work

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 35 mm camera left little room for improvisation. Things were fixed and hard to change on the shoot. 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. What needed to happen was that at a certain moment, a turning point would come up. We explained the situation to the two or three students featured in the scene, giving them some turning points. For example, when François would discuss the subject at hand, they should have this sort of reaction. But they did not know how we got to

this stage. As for the others, they discovered what was going on bit by bit during the take. François guided the scene like a classroom course, 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 center 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. Those everyday details of a classroom that we could never re-create. 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 meters. 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. Making *The Class* was different from all my other films. It is the result of a completely shared responsibility.

Intelligence at Stake

Laurent Cantet. I wanted to do justice to all the work that goes into 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 recognize these deviations. But

there is still the "artistic effect" in this film as in the book. By that, I mean that even if one tries to stick to reality and eventually its monotony, a book and a film naturally lead to exception. 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 criticize François, and for which many people would envy him. There's a bit of Socrates in that man!

François Bégaudeau. Well, that's a bit much !... But I did not calculate the reference to Socrates in the book as some kind of hint. It just so happened that a student once came to speak to me about *The Republic*. I kept this as a moment of grace for the book and Laurent wanted it in the film as well.

Laurent Cantet. It fit in so perfectly that I wondered whether it was not too didactic. In any case, if one is searching for a pedagogic position in this film then that's absolutely fine with me. 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. This is a way of recognizing their active role in the classroom arena. The same holds true for the use of irony, which is a way to solicit an adolescent's ability to decode. 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.



No One is Entirely at Fault

Laurent Cantet. There was no question of making François into a superhero. When one takes risks, things can go wrong, misunderstandings can be provoked. We worked in this direction.

François Bégaudeau. If we had focused solely on the basis of verbal agility and elocution, we would have ended up making a leftwing "Dead Poets Society", with the added value of touch of serious social commentary in the Cantet style. That didn't seem amusing to us at all.

Laurent Cantet. 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 destabilized, 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 affirm 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. I believe that, in conforming with a certain tradition of French cinema, *The Class* is a film without any pure guilt.

Laurent Cantet. The film does not try to defend nor accuse either side. They all have their weaknesses and outbursts, their moments of grace and pettiness. Each one can exhibit both clairvoyance and blindness, comprehension and injustice. I even have the impression that the film expresses something paradoxically positive: a school is sometimes very chaotic, useless to cover its face, there are moments of discouragement but also great moments of grace, immense happiness. And from this great chaos, a lot of intelligence can be born.

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, it fabricates reproduction, etc. This tension was at the basis of the film. More generally, I find the same kind of tension in my favorite 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, catastrophe. Each situation is a utopia, but the sum of 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.





Biographies

Laurent Cantet (Director/Co-Screenwriter) was born in 1961 in Melle, France. **THE CLASS** (Entre les murs) is his fifth feature.

Filmography

Features

2008 **THE CLASS (ENTRE LES MURS)**

Cannes – Official Selection - In Competition

2005 **HEADING SOUTH (VERS LE SUD)**

Venice – Official Selection - In Competition

2001 **TIME OUT (L'EMPLOI DU TEMPS)**

Venice - Lion of the Year

Montreal - Louve d'Or

1999 **HUMAN RESOURCES (RESSOURCES HUMAINES)**

Cesar (French Academy Award) - Best First Film

European Film Awards - Discovery of the Year

San Sebastian - Best New Director

1997 **LES SANGUINAIRES (TV)**

Short films

1995 **JEUX DE PLAGE**

1993 **TOUS A LA MANIF**



(François Bégaudeau, left, Laurent Cantet, right)

François Bégaudeau (Teacher/Co-Screenwriter)

was born in 1971 in Luçon, France. On leave of absence from teaching, he is the author of four novels published in France by Éditions Verticales :

Jouer juste (2003, paperback release by Folio in October 2008), **Dans la diagonale** (2005), **Entre les murs** (2006 ; Prix France Culture -Télérama 2006 ; paperback release by Folio, 2007), **Fin de l'histoire** (2007), he is also the author of a fictionalized biography, **Un démocrate, Mick Jagger** 1960-1969 (published by Naïve, 2005), and, with Arno Bertina and Oliver Rohe, an essay collection **Une année en France** (published by Éditions Gallimard, 2007).

He was director of the collective book **Le sport par les gestes** (Calmann-Lévy). He is a regular contributor for several French magazines : Inculte, Transfuge, Playboy, Muze, Le Monde de l'Éducation. He is a regular on several reviews shows on television and a football columnist for French newspaper Le Monde.



Cast

François Bégaudeau

François

THE STUDENTS

Nassim Amrabt
 Laura Baquela
 Cherif Bounaïdja Rachedi
 Juliette Demaille
 Dalla Doucoure
 Arthur Fogel
 Damien Gomes
 Louise Grinberg

Nassim
 Laura
 Cherif
 Juliette
 Dalla
 Arthur
 Damien
 Louise

Qifei Huang
 Wey Huang
 Franck Keïta
 Henriette Kasaruhanda
 Lucie Landrevie
 Agame Malembo-Emene
 Rabah Naït Oufella
 Carl Nanor
 Esméralda Ouertani
 Burak Özyilmaz
 Eva Paradiso
 Rachel Régulier
 Angélica Sancio
 Samantha Soupirot
 Boubacar Touré
 Justine Wu
 Atouma Dioumassy
 Nitany Gueyes

THE TEACHERS

Vincent Caire
 Olivier Dupeyron
 Patrick Dureuil
 Frédéric Faujas
 Dorothée Guilbot
 Cécile Lagarde
 Anne Langlois
 Yvette Mournetas
 Vincent Robert
 Anne Wallimann-Charpentier

Qifei
 Wei
 Souleymane
 Henriette
 Lucie
 Agame
 Rabah
 Carl
 Sandra
 Burak
 Eva
 Koumba
 Angélica
 Samantha
 Boubacar
 Justine
 Student Representative
 Student Representative

Vincent
 Olivier
 Patrick
 Fred
 Rachel
 Cécile
 Sophie
 Yvette
 Hervé
 Anne

THE ADMINISTRATION AND PERSONNEL

Julie Athenol	The Counselor
Jean-Michel Simonet	The Principal
Olivier Pasquier	Financial Adminstrator
Stéphane Longour	Supervisor
Abdoul Drahamane Sissoko	Supervisor
Aline Zimierski	Kitchen Staff
Silma Aktar	Cleaning Woman
Marie-Antoinette Sorrente	Cleaning Woman

THE PARENTS

Fatoumata Kanté	Souleymane's Mother
Cheick Baba Doumbia	Souleymane's Brother
Khalid Amrabt	Nassim's Father
Adeline Fogel	Arthur's Mother
Lingfen Huang	Wei's Mother
Wenlong Huang	Wei's Father
Sezer Özyilmaz	Burak's Mother
Marie-Laure Bulliard	The Parents' Delegate
Robert Demaille	The Parents' Delegate
Céline Spang	The Parents' Delegate



Crew

Director Laurent Cantet

Screenplay Laurent Cantet, François Bégaudeau, Robin Campillo

Based on the novel « Entre les murs » by François Bégaudeau
(Published in France by Editions Gallimard, Verticales, 2006)

Produced by Carole Scotta, Caroline Benjo, Barbara Letellier,
Simon Arnal

Image Pierre Milon, Catherine Pujol, Georgi Lazarevski

Production Manager & 1st assistant Michel Dubois

Artistic adviser Brigitte Tijou

Sound Olivier Mauvezin, Agnès Ravez, Jean-Pierre Laforce

Editing Robin Campillo, Stéphanie Léger

Set Decoration Sabine Barthélémy, Hélène Bellanger

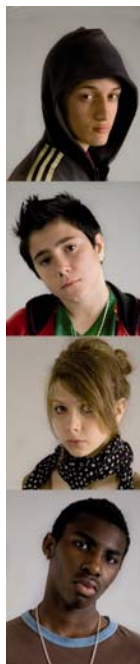
Costumes Marie Le Garrec



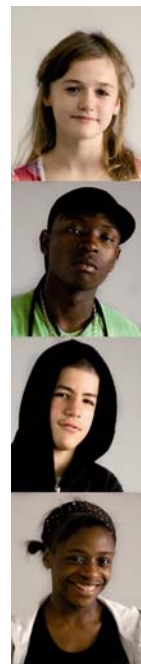
Qifei
Esmeralda
Justine
Nassim



Dalla
Arthur
Burak
Eva



Cherif
Damien
Samantha
Carl



Lucie
Agame
Rabah
Henriette



Souleyman
Laura
Wey
Juliette



Boubacar
Rachel
Louise
Angelica

