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December 4, 2014 6:24 pm

School of Babel — film review

Nigel Andrews Author alerts

Newly-arrived migrants in a Paris school are the subject of this superb documentary



'School of Babel'

Migrants were born as human beings, not as propaganda fodder for opportunist political xenophobes, though you'd never know it from today's debates in Britain and parts of western Europe. You learn or re-learn it in Julie Bertuccelli's superb *School of Babel*, a documentary about a Paris school's *classe d'accueil* — "reception class" — for multi-country teenagers fresh to France.

Stumblingly these 11-and-upwards kids learn French, debate, laugh, play up, bond, sometimes cry. Some questions put to them demarcate a culture's differences by being barely answerable ("What's the French for 'salaam alaikum'?"); others are uniting and revealing: "What did you do on your last day before leaving for France?" Other questions still, put by the pupils to the teacher, challenge geo-theological discord with unwitting blueprints for world harmony. "Whose idea was it that everyone should have a religion?" Give that girl a sanity medal.

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Everyone from the Venezuelan boy cellist to the Serbian Jew fleeing neo-Nazi persecution to the troubled Senegalese girl with "behaviour issues" is individualised with care and focus. The conflicts in their faces are filmed like subtle lightning. Homesickness versus hope; understanding versus bewilderment; solidarity versus fear of hostilities to come as these adventitiously thrown-together outsiders (from Libya, Ireland, China, Ukraine, Africa...) face the moment, arriving in a tearful last scene, when even their new, protective cocoon of makeshift companionship must break up.



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