

# A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Julie Bertucelli's uplifting classroom documentary *School of Babel* offers an insightful child's-eye view of the immigrant experience in France

**By Nick Bradshaw**

Child's-eye movies typically use their innocent's perspective as a potent way in to a story, emphasising curiosity over prejudice, and as a shortcut to making the world look strange and new. As its title suggests, Julie Bertucelli's *School of Babel* contains multitudes of these alien perspectives, all brought together in one class of Paris's La Grange aux Belles secondary school, where the expertly patient teacher Brigitte Cervoni is spending her final year helping pre- and early-teen immigrants from Ireland to China and Ukraine to Senegal gain a quick foothold in French language and culture. Many bear the weight of more experience than you'd wish, but it's still an unusually uplifting social study, a collage of journeys to integration as well as maturity, and by simple design a breath of relief in the bogey-ridden immigration debate.

Bertucelli, best known in the UK for her 2003 drama *Since Otar Left* and 2010's *The Tree* with Charlotte Gainsbourg, has been making documentaries for 20 years. This one is gently self-aware – the children also make their own film about themselves and enter it into Chartres' Ciné-Clap festival of youth films, and both it and Bertucelli's film are part of the glue that joins the kids to their new world.

**Nick Bradshaw:** The film adds to what's almost a genre of French classroom films, from Bertrand Tavernier's *It All Starts Today* [1999] to Nicolas Philibert's *Etre et avoir* [2002] and Laurent Cantet's *The Class* [2008].

**Julie Bertucelli:** Everywhere should make films about school, because it's one of the most important places for kids, for education and democracy – and it's universal. It's true the French make a lot: maybe because they have [a tradition of] strong democratic, republican free schools, without religion.

**NB:** Is this class rare in making its own films?

**JB:** Maybe not so rare. I discovered them because I was jury president for a school film festival... It's a wonderful way of learning. [Modern] kids [live in a world] full of images, and they have to learn the difference between advertising, documentary and fiction.

For my film it was especially great that this year this teacher decided the theme of their film would be 'difference'. I met her at the end of the school year and fell in love with this idea of the world in one class. I came back in September and met all these strong kids from 22 countries, with so many reasons for migrating – love stories, economic stories, musical reasons. Yet they all have the same issue: if you don't encourage them they won't succeed in integrating themselves. You need to give luck, hope and always respect them, and this teacher was wonderful about that.

**NB:** How do you feel the kids' familiarity with moving images affected their presence or performance on camera?

**JB:** Certainly at the beginning for the kids



A great big melting pot: Julie Bertucelli

the filming was about performing and acting. But I showed them my films and talked a lot about them, and I think they understood that I have to be like a little mouse, not there. And when they did try something for the camera, especially with one or two of the girls who are very strong characters, I had a way to make them understand – by not filming them.

Mostly, though, it was a relationship: I was part of the class all this long time we spent together. People don't forget the camera, but... my presence was not a problem for them. I was quite moved that they accepted me – I think because it's an age, a moment where you are focused on deep[er] problems.

The films they made themselves came later in the year, but it was interesting for them to see the difference: how for an interview on camera you're really conscious that you have to say something. It was funny to hear them say, "Oh, I don't like to be in front of the camera," when I'd been filming them all year! So they felt the difference between the deep work of documentarists and journalists who come for three days, ask you new things, send you inside


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and out. Some people try to direct you; I don't at all. If they didn't want to be filmed, I'd go away.

**NB:** The classroom provided some strong formal constraints, with its bare handful of setups.

**JB:** I like these kinds of constraints: a school with white walls, overhead lights, an ugly computer at the back... you have to find other ideas. It's not easy like when I make a film in Australia with wonderful landscapes. Here I only had the tree in the schoolyard to show the seasons passing. But I wanted it to be a film of closeups. I was focused on the faces and relationships, the discussion and the way of living together. And also on growing up, how the relationships are changing. You can read so many things between the lines in a closeup.

**NB:** It's a very 21st-century film, in its makeup and subject-matter.

**JB:** It's the face of the new world, this mix. In France, the people most afraid of immigrants live where there are no immigrants. When I screened the film in France, everyone said, "Great, for once we see it's a great thing to have immigrants..." For me it's normal to invite people from all over the world, and they have a lot to teach us as well as wanting to integrate, succeed and push the country, like everybody. When you live with people, you see they're normal people like you with the same problems, kids, wives, love stories, work – you have no reason to be afraid. But people are used to seeing images of something else. 

 **School of Babel** is released on 5 December and is reviewed on page 89