

SCHOOL OF BABEL

(La Cour de Babel)

A film by Julie Bertuccelli



**France / 2013 / 94 mins / French, Arabic, Spanish, Ukrainian, Mandarin
etc with English subtitles / Cert PG**

UK release 5th December 2014

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SYNOPSIS

They are Irish, Senegalese, Brazilian, Moroccan, Chinese... They are between eleven and fifteen years old and have just arrived in France. For a year they will be all together in the same 'adaptation class' of a Parisian secondary school, under the supervision of their teacher Brigitte Cervoni, the driving force behind the film. Twenty-four students, twenty-four nationalities... In this multicultural arena, we see the innocence, the enthusiasm and inner turmoil of these teenagers who, caught in the midst of starting out on a new life, learning a new language and adapting to a different culture, question our preconceived ideas and give us hope for a better world and a better future...

Official Selection, Rome Film Festival, 2013

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CREW

Directed by	Julie Bertucelli
Cinematography	Julie Bertucelli
Editing	Josiane Zardoya
Original Music	Olivier Daviaud
Sound	Stephan Bauer & Benjamin Bober
Mixing	Olivier Goinard
Produced by	Les Films Du Poisson & Sampek Productions
In Coproduction with	Arte France Cinema

With the participation of the Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée



WITH

Abir Gares (Tunisia)
Agnieszka Zych (Poland)
Alassane Couattara (Mali)
Andréa Drazic (Croatia)
Andromeda Havrincea (Romania)
Daniel Alin Szasz (Romania)
Daniil Kliashkou (Belarus)
Djenabou Conde (Guinea)
Eduardo Ribeiro Lobato (Brazil)
Felipe Arellano Santibanez (Chile)
Kessa Keita (United Kingdom)
Luca Da Silva (Northern Ireland)
Marko Jovanovic (Serbia)
Maryam Aboagila (Libya)
Miguel Angel Cegarra Monsalve (Venezuela)
Mihajlo Sustran (Serbia)
Naminata Kaba Diakite (USA and Ivory Coast)
Nethmal Mampitiya Arachchige (Sri Lanka)
Oksana Denys (Ukraine)
Ramatoulaye Ly (Mauritania)
Thatsarani Mampitiya Arachchige (Sri Lanka)
Xin Li (China)
Yong Xia (China)
Youssef Ezzangaoui (Morocco)

And Brigitte Cervoni (Professor of French the Collège de la Grange aux Belles
reception class, Paris, Xth arrondissement)

Julie Bertuccelli: DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

The daughter of the late filmmaker, Jean-Louis Bertuccelli, Julie Bertuccelli started a college degree in literature, to become a teacher, only to switch to philosophy, and, after graduating, turned to documentary filmmaking, working for the Ateliers Varan in 1993. She was an assistant director to Otar Iosseliani, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Bertrand Tavernier. She made her own directorial debut with the documentary *Un monde en fusion* (2001), while her feature debut came in 2003, with *Since Otar Left*, winner of the Cannes Critics' Week Grand Prize and the César Award for Best First Film. She has directed many documentaries, and *School of Babel*, shot in a Paris school over the course of a year, is her latest one. Julie Bertuccelli is currently working on her third feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

Documentaries

1993	<i>Un métier comme un autre</i> - TV
1994	<i>Une liberté !</i> - TV
1995	<i>Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame</i>
1995	<i>Un dimanche en champagne</i>
1996	<i>Saint-Denis, les couleurs de la ville</i>
1996	<i>Trait d'union</i>
1997	<i>La Fabrique des juges</i> - TV
1999	<i>Bienvenue au grand magasin</i> - TV
2000	<i>Les Îles éoliennes</i> (coll. Voyages, Voyages) - TV
2006	<i>Un monde en fusion</i> - TV
2006	<i>Otar Iosseliani, le merle siffleur</i> (Series : <i>Cinéma de notre temps</i>) - TV
2007	<i>Stage Les chantiers nomades : l'acteur concret au cinéma, autour des objets</i>
2008	<i>Le Mystère Glasberg</i> - TV
2008	<i>Antoinette Fouque, qu'est-ce qu'une femme</i> (Series: <i>Empreintes</i>) - TV
2013	<i>La Cour de Babel</i>

Fiction films

2003	<i>Depuis qu'Otar est parti...</i> (<i>Since Otar Left</i>) Marguerite Duras Award 2004.
2010	<i>L'Arbre</i> (<i>The Tree</i>)



INTERVIEW WITH JULIE BERTUCCELLI

Why a documentary on reception classes?

I discovered reception classes when I was chairing a jury for a schools film competition, a few years ago, in which Brigitte Cervoni and her class were participating. Teenagers from the four corners of the world came with their unique faces, accents, and an extraordinary energy. I felt like going to one of these classes to see what happened there. I had planned to scout for locations in different schools for a year in order to organize a kind of casting and put together a funding application. But at the start of the academic year, I saw Brigitte's new class and fell in love with them. It is rare to see so many nationalities represented in a same classroom. They all had different characters and talents. I felt like shooting immediately and the producer followed me, so we began without any budget. Arte and Pyramide joined us later, at the editing stage.

All the pupils in this class are teenagers...

I found it more interesting not to film very young kids, for whom it all might be easier. These teenagers have already spent many years in their country of origin. It is a strong uprooting at this age. Once in France they are virtually adults because of their big responsibilities. They are sometimes in charge of the whole family as they are the only member to speak French. They are not yet in the post-immigration phase, they are not fed up. They are not stigmatized or rejected for being part of any given category of immigrants. We know that this feeling of a dead end and this future can still happen, but we also know that everything is still possible. They are full of hope. I am perhaps showing a protected and ideal capsule, a utopia in action, but I also show a little theatre of our world in which energy and hope can produce miracles in the same way as the trust and reception provided to these youths...

Everything is filmed inside the secondary school. Were you tempted to see how the pupils lived outside?

I did not feel like entering the families' intimacy, or filming their daily life. It was not the topic. I wanted to film a class, a kind of microcosm, and discover how these teenagers lived, talked and grew up together. What happens in the cocoon of this small community seemed to reveal enough of their personalities and their path so far. Families do exist in the film, but are always shown within the school walls. I filmed parents when they meet the teacher with their child. One gets a sense of their intimacy in these meetings, while leaving our own imagination to roam free and making the off-screen action stronger.

Can you tell us a bit more about the teacher, Brigitte Cervoni?

This teacher is incredible. She animates, she listens, she valorizes the differences as well as each pupil's uniqueness, she brings the best out of them, allowing them to speak in an admirable way, with both respect and confidence. Each time she is able to find the right distance. As a consequence, they adore her. I wanted her to be in the film, but not as one of the film's main characters. It came little by little, as we were progressing with the editing. I like the fact that we see her more and more, that she becomes 'a character' as the film progresses. She is not the film's focus point, but its frame. She becomes a character because she makes all this little world function together. Brigitte has a sense of pedagogy that I find outstanding.

The important thing is for the kids to learn. When she does a test and they get bad marks, she goes over the course again, she explains it and then runs the same test a couple of

weeks or a month later, and then she keeps only the best mark. To build their confidence. The most important is for them to have learnt something, and not just to be sanctioned with marks. In order to teach them the language, Brigitte has them speak a lot about themselves and about what they are interested in. She also put together a pedagogical project for a film on difference that the pupils had to direct themselves, and this film met my topic: What does it mean to live together when you come from all these different countries, cultures, religions and pasts? Of course she has time for all that, this class lives at a different rhythm and she takes the time necessary for it.

How long did you film for?

I followed the class over an academic year. I went there on average twice a week. Brigitte would tell me ahead of time the themes she was preparing to discuss and I would get a sense of whether something might happen. I filmed many things that I did not keep: the outings, staff meetings and so forth. And there were also the grammar and spelling classes, pure French. I filmed them a little but I did not want to make a film on learning French. There were also some terrible frustrations. I would arrive and be told: "Yesterday was amazing!" One cannot anticipate everything. I was not present, for example, the morning Gadhafi was assassinated. Maryam, the young Libyan girl, came with the newspaper and the picture, very moved and happy. A stormy political discussion spontaneously ensued, I missed it!

Let's talk about some 'sensitive' topics that you do not avoid, such as religion for example...

I find this scene beautiful: how secularism enters school and at once imposes itself on everyone. During this session, everyone had to bring 'his' or 'her' object. Several of them chose very personal objects such as dolls or pictures. Youssef brought his Qur'an and Naminata her Bible... For little Djenabou, God is "her best friend", God is all there is, and they all jump into the discussion, they debate and argue. After a while Djenabou stops short of any discussion and concludes that "we don't even know if God exists!" Had she not come to this secular school in France, she might never have had any doubts. To witness this doubt emerging in teenagers is very moving.

Did you do the filming yourself?

Yes I love doing the cinematography, I've done it for all the documentary I've directed. I know by instinct what needs to be filmed. I think that I'd find it difficult to give someone else indications in a context in which I don't control the events. On set you must be vigilant and sharpen your gaze. It's difficult to get good light and to focus in a classroom. Kids constantly speak on top of each other, they move, they hide each other. I am very proud of some moments: Having filmed a kid at a precise moment when there was a facial expression to capture, a laughter, a tear going down their cheek, and so on.

Do you know how many hours of rushes you've accumulated?

No, not exactly, hours and hours! There were classes during which nothing of interest for the film would happen, and then there were scenes I was sure to keep as I was shooting them... Putting all these moments together was not easy. When you have many characters and a lot of material, a balance and a dramatic arc are hard to find. I didn't want a film composed of portraits, I wanted a 'choral' film, a film about an 'ensemble', about being together. In fact I never did any one to one interview... I followed everybody and in the end

the main characters slowly emerge. Take Xin, the young Chinese girl. My first day of shooting was also her first day in this class. She was very shy, she did not talk, she was in her little corner. I was almost disappointed. But after a few months, I saw her slowly opening up... It was beautiful to follow this process and to find it again in the editing process. These are moments of blossoming. The pupils are all a bit shy in the beginning, words are fragile. Slowly, their spoken French improves, and the better they speak French, the more comfortable they feel, the more they chat, the more they enter a classic school structure. They slowly blossom in an incredible way.

Do you think that *The School of Babel* could be useful?

In any case, it is a film I really want to share. I was very surprised to learn that reception classes exist in France. It really is a great thing, and today we must fight for it to continue. It allows any young foreigner arriving in France to learn French, succeed in their schooling, and first and foremost, it favors their integration in France. I don't think it's possible to remain insensitive to what's shown in the film. I hope the film will help the current debates to resonate, debates that are often nauseating. I hope it can help invert pre-conceived ideas, thwart prejudices, make people think a bit deeper, give empathy to those who lack it, and give courage and enthusiasm to those who fight for respect and for welcoming people in this country.

Between the child of a diplomat, the child who comes to study cello, the girl who comes to be reunited with her mother, the girl who is waiting to be granted asylum, the boy whose mother came because of a love story, the girl whose father came in search of work, the boy who was chased away from his country by neo-Nazi groups, all of them represent different stories of immigration. They carry inside themselves a radically different culture, and they confront it with our own culture. The questions of exile and integration, and also their fresh and critical look on our current world and on the society they discover, resonate in this Parisian classroom in a singular and lively way. All are brave kids, mature kids, who bear heavy responsibilities and confront their destinies. Identity for these young people, lived as a double belonging to the country of origin and to the welcoming country, is forever plural. They are heroes of today, they are a source of wealth for our country.

Translated by Diane Gabrysiak

