



Être et avoir

Director: Nicolas Philibert

©/Presented by: Maïa Films

©/[Presented] in co-production with:

Arte France Cinéma, Films d'Ici,

Le Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique

With the participation of: Canal+, Le Centre

National de la Cinématographie, Gimages 4

With the support of:

Le Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale,

Le Conseil Régional d'Auvergne, Procirep

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Titles: Arane

Original Music: Philippe Hersant

Piano: Alice Ader

Clarinet: Nicolas Balderoux

Violincello: Isabelle Veyrier

Music Recording: Benoît Gilg

Sound Re-recording: Archipel et Jackson

Sound: Julien Cloquet

Press Relations: Marie Queysanne

With: Georges Lopez (himself, the teacher)

France 2002©

104 mins

35mm

Big Screen Classics

Être et avoir

Nicolas Philibert on 'Être et avoir'

In Spring 2000, I began thinking about a project about rural life, and I began my research by having meetings with farmers on the edge of bankruptcy... But, in the course of my research, the idea of a film about a little village school took over, without my really knowing why. It's true that, for a long time, I have wanted to make a film about learning to read, but that idea lay fallow, like all those things you keep at the back of your mind until they give you a kind of sign...

What criteria did you use in choosing the school?

A lot of people don't know it, but there are still thousands of single-class schools in France. So I began by choosing a region, the Massif Central, because I wanted to set the film in a mountainous region where the climate is harsh and the winter is difficult. Apart from that, it seemed essential to me to find a class of a manageable size (ten to twelve pupils) so that each child could be identifiable and so become a 'character' in the film. I wanted also that the range of ages should be the largest possible – from nursery age to eleven years old – for the charm that comes from these mixed little communities and to illustrate the demands that are made on the teachers.

How did you go about finding the class?

My research lasted almost five months. At the start, I worked in an empirical fashion. I had some contacts in Lozère and it was there that I began... It was already mid-June, and so I had very little time before the summer holidays. I threaded my way through the region, visiting a lot of schools and travelling hundreds of kilometres along the roads of the Cévennes... Everywhere I was welcomed, but none of the classes seemed entirely suitable: here, there were too many children, there, too few... By 20 October I had located more than 400 single-class schools, made contact with 300 and visited a good hundred of them. But none of them seemed an obvious choice, there was always something not quite right... And then – on the eve of the November holiday, I arrived at the school in the village of Puy-du-Dôme, tucked into the heart of the Livradois Forez – Saint-Etienne sur Usson – and, after a quarter of an hour, I was at last convinced that I had found my class.

In what way was this class better suited than the others?

Beyond the fact that it responded to the criteria I had set (not too many children, a large diversity of ages, etc), I was immediately seduced by the personality of the schoolmaster in whom I detected, beneath his slightly authoritarian air, a profound attentiveness, a delicate and modest being. I had with me a little DV camera that I brought out of my pocket each time I thought I was onto something. While making images of the class, I understood very quickly that the teacher was not trying to show himself, at all costs, in a good light nor was he putting anything on. No propaganda, no hot air... with his slightly traditional style I felt that he established himself at once as a strong character, without taking the film in a backward-looking direction. And then there were the children, with their faces tense with the desire to go forward to the future, faces that were sometimes uneasy, sometimes slack, often funny, cheerful, sometimes serious, closed, indecipherable...

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Big Screen Classics

A Silent Voice Koe no Katachi

Mon 1 Sep 18:00; Sat 13 Sep 20:30; Fri 3 Oct 20:30

Être et avoir

Mon 1 Sep 18:10; Thu 11 Sep 20:30

Rebel without a Cause

Tue 2 Sep 20:50; Sun 14 Sep 12:30; Wed 17 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by Sarah Cleary, curator of Funeral Parade presents); Sun 5 Oct 12:30

Girlhood Bande de filles

Wed 3 Sep 18:10 (+ intro); Fri 3 Oct 20:45

Fame

Thu 4 Sep 18:00; Fri 26 Sep 20:25;
Wed 8 Oct 20:25

To Sir, With Love

Fri 5 Sep 18:15; Mon 15 Sep 20:50

Good Morning, Boys!

Sat 6 Sep 15:40; Tue 16 Sep 20:45

Wild Strawberries Smultronstället

Sat 6 Sep 17:20; Sat 4 Oct 12:00; Tue 7 Oct 21:00

Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom Lunana

Sun 7 Sep 12:00; Sat 4 Oct 12:40

Rushmore

Mon 8 Sep 20:45; Wed 17 Sep 20:55;
Sat 27 Sep 18:30; Wed 1 Oct 21:05

Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.

Tue 9 Sep 20:40; Mon 22 Sep 14:50;
Sun 5 Oct 18:20

The Breakfast Club

Wed 10 Sep 18:15 (+ intro); Sat 20 Sep 20:45;
Mon 29 Sep 20:50

Bad Education La Mala Educación

Fri 12 Sep 20:30; Thu 18 Sep 20:50;
Thu 2 Oct 20:45; Tue 7 Oct 18:15

I Flunked, But... Rakudai wa shitakeredo

Sun 14 Sep 15:55; Wed 1 Oct 18:30 (+ intro by
Professor Jinhee Choi, King's College London);
Tue 7 Oct 20:45

If....

Sun 14 Sep 18:15; Sun 21 Sep 11:50;
Wed 24 Sep 14:40; Mon 6 Oct 20:45

Full Metal Jacket

Fri 19 Sep 18:00; Thu 25 Sep 20:45;
Tue 30 Sep 20:45

School Daze

Wed 24 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by film critic
Kambole Campbell); Sat 4 Oct 20:35

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Did the teacher accept easily?

Like many others before him he was at first astonished that one could make a film on such a fragile subject: documentaries are invariably associated with TV, magazines and journalistic reportage. I explained my approach, pointing out that the film would turn its back on anything didactic, that it wasn't there to illustrate in images a notion worked out in advance, that I didn't want an approach founded on the picturesque or on nostalgia ('ah, the depletion of the countryside' 'ah, a school of a type that we now see on the road to extinction') but on the desire to follow as closely as possible the work and progress of the children, in a way that the spectators can share their trials, their successes, their moments of discouragement...

For his part, he talked to me about his class, of his attachment to this little group which required him, even after 35 years' experience, to adapt his working methods, without hiding the fact that he himself found them a little classical, suggesting several times that I should choose someone more modern. I had to reassure him: I had no intention of examining under a microscope his method of teaching fractions or past participles. Of course, he would be the pivot, the centre of gravity of the film, constantly under the eye of the camera, but what we would retain of him would be an impression of the whole, the shape of a personality. Little by little, he began to give his trust... At 55, he had a year and a half before his retirement. This film might, perhaps, give a chance for him to end his career well, before going on to other things. I asked him to take a few days to think about it. 48 hours later, he gave me his consent.

How long did you stay in the class, and what difficulties did you come across?

The shooting took ten weeks – over a period between December 2000 and June 2001 – during which we accumulated almost 60 hours of footage. From a technical point of view it was very difficult. Julien Cloquet worked alone on the sound recording. He had to cover the whole class and, by definition, we never knew in advance who was going to speak next. As far as getting the images were concerned, the traps were innumerable. We had to watch out for our reflections in the window and in the picture frames. The decision to not add our own lights to the existing ones in the classroom meant that we had very little depth of field and no margin of error on the focus. But that's in the nature of this sort of filming, and it pushes everyone to give the best of themselves.

The film gives an impression of great serenity. Do you feel that you've shown the school in too idyllic a light?

Idyllic? For me, the film is very open, it gives everyone the possibility of projecting into it what they wish, their own memories of childhood... For my own part, I see in it a certain gravity, indeed a certain violence, even if it is somewhat suppressed. Before making the film, I believe that I had forgotten to what degree it is difficult to learn, but also to grow up. This dive back into school made me recall it with a vengeance. It's that, perhaps, that is the true subject of the film.

Production notes