

The Intouchables, record-breaking French film, and Ruby Sparks, “small change” in Los Angeles

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The Intouchables directed and written by Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano; *Ruby Sparks* directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, written by Zoe Kazan

The Intouchables, directed by French filmmakers Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache, is a predictable but touching comedy about the relationship between an upper class Frenchman and his Muslim Senegalese caretaker.

Based on a true story, the movie is clearly intended to counteract the racist and anti-immigrant policies increasingly being promoted by the French ruling elite and ultra-right political elements in particular.

The film’s concerns have obviously evoked a popular response. *The Intouchables* has broken box office records in France, and more than 30 million people have seen the movie in Western Europe. With a worldwide gross surpassing \$300 million, it is the most successful non-English language film of all time. Nominated for a total of nine 2012 César Awards (France’s Academy Awards), the movie also won the Grand Prize at the 2011 Tokyo International Film Festival.

The Intouchables opens with a police chase, as Philippe (veteran actor François Cluzet) is being skillfully chauffeured in his Maserati by Driss (newcomer Omar Sy), a tough African-born ex-con from the suburban slums of Paris. The duo are on a high-speed joy ride and cunningly elude their police pursuers. A flashback portrays the history of their unlikely liaison.

Philippe lives in splendor in a Parisian mansion, paralyzed from a paragliding accident. Lonely and miserable, he grudgingly oversees the interviewing of potential caregivers for a demanding position. Driss applies, but only to fulfill a requirement so he can obtain welfare benefits. Belligerent towards his social betters, he succeeds in pocketing one of Philippe’s Fabergé jeweled eggs—a gift from the latter’s beloved, deceased wife.

Driss returns to his bleak environs—a cramped apartment in a huge, rundown housing project—only to be thrown out of the flat by his exasperated and overworked aunt. Seemingly futureless, he roams the cold, unforgiving streets and alleys. The next day Driss shows up at the mansion to collect his paper. He learns he has been hired on a trial basis and is whisked away to his quarters—a sumptuous suite.

As the bond between Philippe and Driss deepens, the inevitable culture clashes ensue, never escalating, however, into open class animosity. As such, the film is built upon many audience-pleasing features. The most

prominent are the remarkable performances by the two leads: Cluzet, expressive without the use of his limbs, and Sy, an elegant, non-stop powerhouse.

What the actors bring to each role in the way of transcending social barriers provides somewhat fantastical and guilty pleasures to the viewer.

Driss’ ridicule of Philippe’s haute culture provides many occasions for conventional but charming humor. Modern art, classical music and silly opera costumes are fair game for Driss’ irreverence.

Driss advises Philippe about parenting and an embryonic love affair, and in turn receives enough of a cultural uplift to be able to help his troubled family and escape his circumstances.

The Intouchables attempts humanely and lovingly to depict a disenfranchised, abused immigrant population. Having generated remarkable ticket sales in France, Germany, Italy and Spain in particular, the film is a blockbuster, but not of the empty-headed (or worse) variety such as *Titanic* and *Avatar* or Christopher Nolan’s *Batman/Dark Knight* trilogy.

Filmmakers Toledano and Nakache were inspired to make the film after seeing a 2004 documentary, *In Life and Death*, about the real-life story of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo and his caretaker, Abdel Sellou, who is actually from Algeria.

In a press release last May, Harvey Weinstein, US distributor of *The Intouchables*, noted that Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front was polling 16 percent in the upcoming French presidential election and observed, “That’s frightening to me, and I think it’s important to speak up and speak out against [Jean Marie] Le Pen and his ideas.” Weinstein added that the movie “is based on a true story, and it’s a funny, extremely entertaining illustration of how simple human connection trounces socioeconomic, religious and racial divides.”

In a comment, Toledano and Nakache explained that their intent had been to create “a heartfelt buddy film,” but to their surprise, “the film has inspired an impassioned debate about a massive problem in France: socio-economic inequality between the privileged bourgeoisie and its marginalized neighbors, most of them having immigrant origins.” They assert that “the film has given millions of people hope that real trust and understanding is possible across ethnic, class and physical ability divides,” adding “In today’s tense social context ... it is more important than ever to continue the dialogue about ethnic and socio-economic

tensions in France,” (Huffington Post, May 7, 2012).

Precisely because it sets out in part to build “real trust” across “class divides,” the film is inevitably a sanitized version of reality. The storyline is loaded with built-in emotional triggers that substitute for more genuine, in-depth analysis and challenging drama.

Despite the best intentions of the film’s creators, the plague of racism is not overcome on the level of one-on-one encounters, i.e., this sort of thinking: “If only people of different ethnic backgrounds got to know each other better, prejudice and bias would die away.” This is an illusion. Racism and anti-Muslim sentiment are bound up with the inability of capitalism to deal with massive social ills in any progressive fashion and the deliberate attempt by the powers that be in France and elsewhere to make a scapegoat out of the immigrants.

Racism and other poisons are overcome in the course of an immense political struggle by the working population of all backgrounds against the existing social order. Although a fortunate few like Driss are able to get out of the slums, millions remain trapped in poverty and degradation.

It is legitimate to question how deeply—and courageously—the film delves into complexities that would make the anti-Muslim campaign more understandable.

Furthermore, the filmmakers are uncomfortable with emphasizing Driss’ circumstances. Says co-director Toledano in the movie’s production notes: “When you go into the projects, the images are instantly striking. But we are careful to remain focused on our subject. In the first minutes of the film, we don’t want to paint a portrait of the big city outskirts today but explain who Driss is, where he comes from and, through that, highlight the contrast with Philippe’s townhouse in Saint Germain des Prés. Today, audiences are aware of the harsh reality of the projects. Therefore, one shot is enough to get across the world we’re in.”

Perhaps, but might it not be the case that “one is shot is enough” when success stories such as Driss’ are encouraged?

Unfortunately, wishful thinking and skirting around the most troubling realities end up limiting the film’s impact. Nonetheless, the well-made *The Intouchables* is an international phenomenon for essentially healthy reasons.

Ruby Sparks

American filmmakers Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris have followed up their 2006 hit *Little Miss Sunshine* with a new movie, *Ruby Sparks*, written by and starring 28-year-old Zoe Kazan, the granddaughter of Elia Kazan and daughter of screenwriter Nicholas Kazan.

Ruby Sparks is a likeable work that offers a comic rendition of the Greek myth Pygmalion, in which a sculptor falls in love with his creation.

Los-Angeles based novelist Calvin (Paul Dano) is struggling with writer’s block ten years after his sensational literary debut at the age of 19. On the advice of his psychiatrist (Elliott Gould), Calvin commences a writing exercise that unwittingly leads to an on-paper character becoming

real flesh and blood.

Initially unnerved by the sudden appearance of the fictitious girl of his dreams, Ruby Sparks (Kazan), the socially awkward Calvin eventually relaxes into the relationship. Not before, however, Ruby has to overcome his skepticism, as well as that of his yuppie brother Harry (Chris Messina). The “success” of the match stems from the fact that Calvin can make of Ruby anything he wants by a few keystrokes on his manual typewriter. He is the puppet master and, in the film’s culminating sequence, the powerless puppet is nearly destroyed.

Ruby Sparks is an innocuous, forgettable place-holder: it contains appealing performers and characters pleasant to watch. It shows only the comfortable, upscale parts of Los Angeles. Producer Albert Berger comments in the movie’s production notes: “The story is grounded in reality and we use places that real people go in L.A.: El Coyote restaurant, Café Figaro, Skylight Books, the Egyptian Theatre and Griffith Park. Every scene takes place in the same neck of the woods in an organic way.”

“Grounded in reality” and inhabited by “real people” no doubt, but which ones? The answer is fairly clear.

Kazan is lively; Dano is competent, if not a little dull. Annette Bening and Antonio Banderas are inserted, rather artificially, into the movie as Calvin’s bohemian mother and her eccentric partner, respectively. Disappointingly, the comedic talents of Steve Coogan, as a self-proclaimed literary icon, and Gould are essentially wasted. Messina as Harry adds some much needed comic relief.

Kazan explains in the production notes that “I was interested in the theme of control in relationships and the way we bring in ideas of who the person we love should be ... How do you make room in a relationship for two separate people?”

Only small truths are dealt with in *Ruby Sparks*. Within its narrow scope, the movie has a few insights. At one point, a character quotes J.D. Salinger as saying, “Write what you can, then disappear.” I don’t think the legendary novelist would have counseled any writer to focus on the small change of life before departing the scene.



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