

Reflections on “Les Choristes” by Stuart Fernie

“Les Choristes” is touching, charming, funny, poignant and thought-provoking. Above all, however, it is very French. Character driven and intrinsically human, this is the story of a new supervisor, Clément Mathieu, who arrives at Fond de l’Étang boarding school for underprivileged boys and immediately comes into conflict with the disciplinarian ethos of the Headmaster, Monsieur Rachin.

When we entrust the education of our youngsters to teachers, we make assumptions about teachers’ motivation, qualifications and character. “Les Choristes” challenges all three of these assumptions and presents an at times harrowing picture of the post-war education system in France. Granted, this school has its particular problems in that we are dealing with extremes – orphaned boys, or boys whose parents don’t have the means to support them (financially and/or socially), but this only serves to accentuate the clash between the two styles of education drawn in the film – strict and autocratic discipline contrasted with a more sensitive, caring and human approach.

The Headmaster, Monsieur Rachin, is a particularly unsympathetic character, cold and rigid in his application of rules. He would not be out of place in a factory operated by machines, with fully functioning pupils the end product.

This is in direct contrast with Clément Mathieu, a lowly supervisor who nonetheless presents a far more attractive and human approach to the problems of educating and dealing with potentially difficult children.

Rachin’s methods and approach recall the Ancien Régime, while Mathieu’s methods are in keeping with the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. Mathieu appears to embody the watchwords “in loco parentis” (in place of parents), the bywords of the Scottish teaching profession, in that he shows a caring attitude and tries to nurture the boys, rather than simply process them. Rachin shows scant regard for his charges and clearly sees his role as one of management rather than nurturing or development.

The film could easily have fallen into a more sombre tone, given the context and much of the content, but Barratier and his actors manage to maintain a positive tone, largely by not dwelling on the more unpleasant events, but also, and perhaps more importantly, through the injection of humour and Mathieu’s offer of hope in the form of positive action and a sense of progress.

The music of the film adds considerably to the tone and enhances pathos. At times deceptively simple, yet tinged with sadness and youthful spirit, the music of the film enables us to share even more keenly the emotions and reactions of the characters.

What is the key to Mathieu’s success with the boys? Clearly they learn to appreciate music and sing beautifully, but more importantly they learn respect – for others and for themselves through the efforts they make and the success they gain as a result of these

efforts. They learn to treat one another with consideration. Music may be the medium, but the objective and end result is humanity.

The film clearly suggests that one man can make a difference. Mathieu touches these boys' lives. Quite apart from the introduction of music (which is sufficient grounds for success!), he also introduces humanity and respect.

Like the vast majority of decent human beings, his deeds remain unsung and he will never achieve the fame and recognition he may desire, yet he has touched and changed lives in a most fundamental way – he is someone to look up to, someone to turn to, someone tangible whose “heroics” are achievable by us all. It is sad, perhaps even tragic, that he considers himself a failure, and indeed this may call in to question the standards by which society judges its heroes.

He does, of course, have one significant failure – Mondain. However, even Mondain appears to suggest that he recognises Mathieu's potential positive influence as he nods toward him as he is taken away by the police. Perhaps it is simply too late for Mondain – he is unable or unwilling to change, but perhaps also, if he had met someone like Mathieu some years before

It should be pointed out that Mathieu does not suffer too much at the hands of the boys. In this respect the film could fairly be accused of being a little simplistic, but acceptably so. The boys undoubtedly respond too quickly and easily to Mathieu's style, but we should remember that this is a hymn to humanity. This is a representation, a work of art if you will. It makes its points clearly and persuasively, if manipulatively, with steady progression of the storyline and in character development.

The performances throughout are excellent – Rachin (as played by François Berléand) lacks any possibility or element of sympathy (to have incorporated such elements might have led towards tragedy), and instead we are invited to see and laugh at his weaknesses. In this way the film remains entertaining while making serious points.

Mathieu (Gérard Jugnot) is a lovely character and is beautifully played by Jugnot so that we have maximum sympathy for this underdog at odds with his time and society who becomes an unlikely hero. He has everyman appeal, and seems to suggest that any man can be a hero by being human.

The direction by Christophe Barratier is brisk and emotionally engaging – we feel real sympathy for these characters and come to care about their fates, though it would have been nice to hear and see how Le Querrec, Boniface, Corbin and the others had fared in life, as well as Morhange and Pépinot. However, such criticism is trifling in the face of such a touchingly told and affecting tale of humanity.