



The Teachers' Lounge

Monday, March 25, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Karen Gordon | Original Cin | Rated PG-13 | 98 mins.

A classroom in a quiet middle school is the setting for the taut, gripping drama, *The Teachers' Lounge*. But the events in the film speak to much larger issues at a time in our world where situations can blow up quickly, and facts are on a sliding scale.

The film, co written and directed by Ilker Çatak is Germany's submission to the Oscars in the Best International Film category and has been shortlisted, for good reason. Whether you take it at face value, or see larger meaning in it, this is a terrific movie.

The film centers on Carla Nowak (in a fantastic performance by Leonie Benesch). She's a Seventh Grade math and phys-ed teacher, new to her school. She's a quiet woman, serious about her work, student focused and fair minded.

The school she's working has been grappling with some problems - notably a series of thefts, money stolen out of people's pockets, wallets, etc. And the administration suspects that the thief is a student.

Two senior teachers have been investigating and believe the culprit is in her class.

When the film begins, she's sitting in as two senior teachers are trying to get her class's two representatives to point to any students they feel could be the guilty party. The students are reluctant and resentful. And Nowak respects the students' rights to resist manipulation and pressure. Escalation results in at least one wrong loudly public accusation.

Then, in the teacher's lounge, Nowak sees one of the teachers steal coins from the piggy bank used to pay for coffee via the honour-system.

So, she conducts a test. She puts her wallet in her jacket on the back of a chair in the teacher's lounge, and leaves her computer slightly open with the camera running. When she returns, some of the money in her wallet is gone, and the camera has caught someone appearing to go into her jacket. Only a part of the shirt is visible, but it has a very specific and easily identifiable pattern.

That shirt belongs to the cheerful, efficient office staffer Mrs. Kuhn (Eva Löbau), whose son Oskar (Leo Stettinisch) is in Nowak's class, a math whiz, and one of her favourite students. Nowak privately confronts her, asks for the money back and suggests that if the cash is returned, they can simply put the incident behind them.

Kuhn not only denies she did anything wrong, but her reaction is so charged and aggressive that Nowak is put off. She immediately shows the footage to the school principal Dr. Böhm (Anne-Kathrin Gummich) who calls Kuhn in and asks for an explanation.

Though the shirt she is wearing is visible on camera, Kuhn denies everything. The situation is now complicated by Nowak's secret taping, which is a serious privacy issue.

Equilibrium is lost amid student defiance, swirling rumours, and the taking of sides in nasty ways.

German director Çatak and his co-writer Johannes Duncker have written an economical script that keeps us inside the school, and focused on Nowak as the walls feel like they're closing in, and as every day seems to bring a new layer of threat or complication.

Çatak does interesting things with *The Teachers' Lounge*. He's kept the movie small and down to earth. This isn't a dystopian look at the future of humanity, but a story first about a school and a community, and how things can begin to spiral and give over to group-think.

A situation that is undefined and not complete is taken up as a cause without adequate facts. And a coalition of people who aren't nearly as informed as they believe they are, feel empowered by their own conclusions and defiant when challenged. They become resolutely committed to what they think, without question.

The students insist their truth is what they believe and that's all that matters. It's a power position in a school where lines of respect and power go hand in hand. But in the process, they dehumanize Nowak.

The Teachers' Lounge is focused on the small community that is the school. But as the film progresses a pack mentality emerges and it starts to feel uncomfortably like what we've seen with the rise of social media, cancel culture, and extreme political movements.

At the same time, Çatak doesn't demonize anyone. Everyone in the movie has made mistakes. Nowak violated privacy. Dr. Böhm escalated rather than investigated. Kuhn lied and doubled down. The students are manipulated. There's power structures in the school system that have been there for a long time, and everyone it seems, pushes to express themselves within the structure, not noticing the effect on individuals.

The film, which is an economical 90 minutes, is a drama which, at times plays like a mystery, with incredible tension. Çatak gives us a satisfying film, but an unsettling one with unanswered questions.

In German with English Subtitles.

Pre-Show Organ Concerts Return to After Hours Film Society!



Organist David Rhodes and the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ Concerts have returned to the Tivoli stage, thanks to a generous grant from the JCS Arts, Health & Education Fund of DuPage Foundation. The organ lights up 30 minutes before the screening, so come early and enjoy the music!



Monday, April 8, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Monica Castillo | RogerEbert.com | Rated PG-13 | 102 mins.

Does crime pay? In the world of François Ozon's fluffy period farce, it certainly can. When aspiring actress Madeleine Verrier (Nadia Tereszkiewicz) visits a famous producer's house, the meeting goes badly, and she leaves with an awful story of the man's attempted assault. She tells all to her fellow down-and-out roommate, best friend, and aspiring lawyer Pauline Mauléon (Rebecca Marder) the moment she returns. Before long, Madeleine is accused of carrying out the man's murder, and when it seems she can escape "justice" quicker by confessing to the crime, she does, setting off an even funnier chain of events that brings in the real killer, a faded silent film star named Odette Chaumette (Isabelle Huppert), back to the spotlight.

"The Crime is Mine" marks a return to comedy for the prolific French director, who spent many of the last few years creating dramas like "Summer of 85" and "Frantz." Reuniting with his "8 Women" star Huppert and the dynamic Tereszkiewicz and Marder, Ozon creates a fantasy world of gorgeous 1930s gowns, Art Deco luxury, and of course, a corrupt court and gullible public that's thrown into a frenzy by Madeleine's supposed crime. Ozon creates dizzying comedy out of a court that supposedly sides with the plight of women, when in reality their support is not always so. As part of Madeleine's explanation of the crime and Pauline's defense of it, they plead to the goodness of sisterhood and solidarity, arguing against the ways men have exploited them and kept them at the edge of losing their home and good names. The tactic works, but only to a point, because when Huppert's Odette comes to collect her slice of the sisterhood, she threatens to expose Madeleine and Pauline as frauds.

Ozon, who also wrote the film, whips up a frothy story of murder, romance, blackmail, girl power, and a little bit of old French film history. It's an escapist sort of frivolity that delights in bad behavior, decadent costumes and lavish sets, like a farcical version of "Chicago" minus the musical numbers. Cinematographer Manuel Dacosse works within a palette of macaroons, from eye-catching pastels to delicious mauves and teals, under golden tones of light that evoke a sense of the romantic past between Ozon's screwball comedy beats. Not all of it works; but even when something seems off, the movie never dawdles, springing back up to move on to the next scene.

The trio of women who lead the movie do an impeccable job of keeping the energy silly yet vibrant. As the wide-eyed ingenue

Madeleine, Tereszkiewicz registers innocence, yet is smart enough to outwit her enemies. Marder's Pauline is even sharper, arguing her way out of everything from eviction to her client's jail sentence. The pair share a "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"-like dynamic, with some longing glances that hint that perhaps Pauline is more into Madeleine than Madeleine is of Pauline. Madeleine's main affection belongs to Andre (Édouard Sulpice), the most clueless character in the cast. She adores him despite it. Huppert, on the other hand, charges in as Odette in every scene like a villainous diva, a cross between Sarah Bernhardt and Norma Desmond. She bats every line like a spike into the ground, leaving the scene of each conflict like a lioness licking her lips after a satisfying kill. She gives the film new life just when it seems like everything could fall into place a tad too neatly.



As silly as Ozon's "The Crime is Mine" may be, the French farce is still wildly entertaining. Somehow, murder improves Madeleine's life in comical ways. Ozon has a ball poking fun at a corrupt justice system that shuffles one criminal to the next crime-out-of-convenience and imagines how public opinion would fashion Madeleine into a feminist symbol. Tereszkiewicz and Marder embrace their characters and their rapport with each other, but it's Huppert who relishes her character's crime as a license to steal every one of her scenes.

In French with English subtitles.

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COMMON GROUND

Monday, April 22, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Greg Archer | MovieWeb | Rated R | 129 Mins.

Can Hollywood A-listers like Laura Dern, Jason Momoa, Rosario Dawson, Woody Harrelson, Ian Somerhalder, and Donald Glover deliver a timely and strong enough message about the benefits of Regenerative Agriculture and have it take root in the collective consciousness to spark positive change? Let's hope so.

Eco-filmmakers Josh and Rebecca Tickell (Fuel, The Big Fix, Kiss the Ground) have populated their new documentary, Common Ground, with as much celebrity hype as important facts about the state of the country's soil. That could be a good thing. These stars, who take turns narrating the doc, elevate the couple's latest endeavor, which recently nabbed the Human/Nature Award at the Tribeca Film Festival. But it's the filmmakers' inventive mix of storytelling, graphics, and easily digestible information that will undoubtedly win audiences over.



True, there's a sense that the Tickells are preaching to the choir here. However, anybody interested in the environment will appreciate learning more about the titans of the "Regenerative Movement" featured throughout.

The Tickells previously turned heads with their oil spill documentary, The Big Fix, which hit the Cannes Film Festival back in 2010. Kiss the Ground, which also included Woody Harrelson as narrator, debuted on Netflix in 2020. It revealed a "new, old approach" to farming. If it seems like the filmmakers are covering similar ground here, they are to some extent (and quite literally), but the result is as illuminating as it is timely.

Common Ground is structured as a moving letter to the next generation that will inherit the Earth. Dern, Momoa, et al. narrate these "letters" but audiences also see them narrating — as if to drive the point home. It works. These folks look great on screen, after all. We've grown to trust them as actors. Why not see them talk to us? The hope, it seems, is to deliver a powerful and urgent message about the grim realities of our future. The filmmakers offer a hopeful and pragmatic plan, too. The goal? Mend the broken systems that dictate our existence on Earth.

The Tickells springboard from those letters to spotlight the intrepid souls who are creating an innovative new food system that produces ample quantities of nutritionally dense food while also balancing the climate, nourishing our bodies, and restoring the entire ecosystem. It all makes for a rewarding doc about agriculture and the environment. It all lies in the soil, folks.

One of the best things about Common Ground is the painstaking amount of research that went into its creation and the way the filmmakers deliver that to us. Factoids arrive in digestible chunks, but they will leave you unsettled.

We're told about Dr. George Washington Carver, for instance. He was a faculty member at The Tuskegee Institute in Alabama when he realized the soil in the South was becoming depleted of nutrients, thanks to an over reliance on cotton. His proposal of using cover crops — vetch, clover, and peanuts — would pull nitrogen from the air and replenish the soil. Black farmers embraced the method and managed to balance the farming economy in the rural South, but the industrial agricultural sector ignored Carver's discoveries, and after World War II, the U.S. turned to mass-produced machines "developed for the battlefield" and toxic pesticides and herbicides that were used on farm fields.

One compelling segment reveals side by side comparisons of the soil used by two different farmers. Surely Regenerative Agriculture is the way. That's the message. And while the doc is intended to keep playing that note, audiences don't feel bombarded by the message.

Other segments in Common Ground certainly stand out, too. Take note of the 411 on the Farm Bill provisions featured. Those provisions mandate what to grow, and they don't do much to fix the soil dilemma. We also learn about the massive debt of farmers who have been forced to purchase pesticides and genetically modified seeds designed to survive the poisons. Let's talk about Monsanto's Roundup, shall we? The filmmakers do. Sobering to say the least.

Hope arrives by sharing knowledge. Adopting regenerative farming techniques is the clear path toward restoring balance we're told. A nice touch is the inclusion of Indigenous and modern farming practices that adhere to four principles: no tillage, no chemicals, cover crops, and the use of herd grazing.

As for the stars, Dern and Dawson are compelling and believable; Momoa and Harrelson chill and trustworthy. They're each given a segment to narrate and each segment takes on a personality of its own. Somehow it all works.

"This is the story of how soil might just save us," the documentary tells us, hoping it will take root. Whether something necessary grows from that to create positive change remains to be seen, but you get the sense while watching Common Ground that, like Leonardo DiCaprio's The 11th Hour and Before the Flood — and even Al Gore's groundbreaking doc, An Inconvenient Truth — that time is running out. In that respect, Common Ground is vital viewing.



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"One of the most thrilling films of the year."

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Monday, March 25 at 7:30 pm

"A masterful comedy."

—Cineuropa

Monday, April 8 at 7:30 pm



"A moving letter to the next generation."

—MovieWeb

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