

# THE FITS

**Monday, August 22, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by Manohla Dargis / NYT*    *Not Rated*    *72 Mins.*

"The Fits," a dreamy, beautifully syncopated coming-of-age tale, takes place in and around a recreational center that could not look less inviting. It's the usual impersonal slab, the kind that municipalities have been building for decades to educate, or sometimes just to warehouse, restless young bodies and minds. The girls who congregate at this particular center in Cincinnati, though, have their own desires, which they express with fists and feet, grace and power. They move — fluidly, ferociously and with escalating mystery — to their own transporting beat.

The same holds true of "The Fits," a singular first feature from the young director Anna Rose Holmer, who's made a movie that can feel like a memory. The story — Ms. Holmer wrote the script with one of the movie's producers, Lisa Kjerulff, and its editor, Saela Davis — is elemental, elliptical and radiates out from its sun, the 11-year-old Toni (the wonderful Royalty Hightower). One of those quiet, watchful girls (either naturally shy or tactically stoic), Toni all but lives at the recreational center, specifically the boxing club where she works out with her older brother, Jermaine (Da'Sean Minor), throwing punches and counting sit-ups as she gasps for her next breath.

Toni's boxing routine derails after she peers through a center window one day and discovers a new world — a dance team called the Lionesses. They're a gorgeously variegated group, these girls, who come in all sizes, shapes, hues, hairstyles and degrees of coordination. Some fill the room with vertiginous movement, with spinning limbs and whipping hair that turn their practice room into an Abstract Expressionist canvas of slashing, swooping lines. Other girls just get tangled up and collapse like pickup sticks (all flailing, all flopping). Yet even these fumlbers keep chasing the group beat, waving their arms while together everyone pumps their hips.



Curious, Toni joins the Lionesses (what's the worst that can happen?, her brother shrugs); it isn't a fast fit. Trained in the boxing club, she jabs more easily than she turns, but she's strong; another new recruit, Beezy (Alexis Neblett, a charmer), calls her "Guns," a nod to her muscled arms. But Toni keeps at it, awkwardly miming the moves of the older girls while studying their rites, as when she observes two beauties primping before a mirror. In time, she also picks up their language: She pierces her ears, wears nail polish and flashes a smile. The drill that the Lionesses practice is part joyous self-expression, part ritualistic bluff, which makes it a perfect manifestation of adolescence.

Ms. Holmer leads with atmosphere and space (including that landscape called the human face), and tends to let the sumptuously textured visuals and intermittent blasts of percussive music express what the characters don't. (The cinematographer is Paul Yee, another talented newcomer.) Just at the point when the movie seems to be settling into familiar indie-film narrative drift, the older girls begin having inexplicable seizures, fits. One after another, they violently succumb, bodies shuddering and falling in front of their mesmerized team members. The girls are horrified by these spells, but they're also fascinated maybe especially because the victims soon recover.

An outsider is called in to investigate the attacks, and there's talk of contaminated water. The inquiry adds a hint of drama to the minimalist plot, but is finally irrelevant to the seizures, their enveloping mysteriousness and profound impact on Toni. Are these Freudian fits, "Crucible"-like convulsions, orgiastic reveries, initiation ceremonies (into femininity, etc.) or sly performances from attention-hungry adolescents? If the filmmakers never directly say, it's because they don't have to. Gender is some kind of performance (hysterical, hysterically absurd). And anyway Toni figures it out. This is, after all, her story, as the expressionistic cinematography underscores.

As Toni shifts between the boxing club (she helps her brother clean up) and the dance team, "The Fits" seems to be inching into perilously schematic ground. There's something altogether too neat-sounding about a story in which a prepubescent girl overtly coded as a tomboy travels back and forth — with inquisitiveness and periodic unease — between these distinctly gendered spaces. The miracle of the movie is that, like Toni, it transcends blunt, reductive categorization partly because it's free of political sloganeering, finger wagging and force-fed lessons. Any uplift that you may feel won't come from having your ideas affirmed, but from something ineluctable — call it art.

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All profits from this program will benefit the Naperville Art League's Classroom Renovation Project. Special Admission: \$8 for Members of AHFS & Arts Organizations (with ID), \$10 Non-Members.

# THE INNOCENTS

Monday, September 12, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Stephen Holden / NYT Not Rated 115 Mins.

Much of Anne Fontaine's blistering film "The Innocents" is set within the walls of a Polish convent in December 1945, just after the end of World War II. What at first appears to be an austere, holy retreat from surrounding horrors is revealed to be a savagely violated sanctuary awash in fear, trauma and shame. The snow-covered, forested landscape of the convent is photographed to suggest an ominous frontier that offers no refuge from marauding outsiders.

The central character, Mathilde (Lou de Laâge, of "Breathe"), is a young doctor caring for French soldiers in a Red Cross hospital. One day, a young nun appears and pleads with Mathilde to make an emergency visit to a Benedictine convent to save the life of a sister who lies gravely ill. Defying hospital protocol, Mathilde slips away to the convent, where she discovers a pregnant novice in the throes of labor. Mathilde delivers the baby by cesarean section but is sworn to secrecy by the fearful Mother Abbess (Agata Kulesza, of "Ida"), who is terrified lest the news of a pregnant nun tarnish the convent's reputation.

Mathilde, a nonbeliever, learns that several months earlier, Soviet soldiers occupying Poland stormed the convent and repeatedly raped the nuns, leaving many pregnant. Mathilde agrees to return and assist in the deliveries of their babies.

"The Innocents" is based on real events, recounted in notes by Madeleine Pauliac, a Red Cross doctor on whom Mathilde is based. Ms. Fontaine ("Coco Before Chanel," "Gemma Boverly"), who extensively researched these atrocities and spent time in two Benedictine convents, writes in the production notes that the soldiers felt no sense of wrongdoing, because they were encouraged by their superiors to commit these crimes as a reward for their hard work on the battlefield.



While driving back to the hospital, Mathilde is intercepted at a Soviet checkpoint and pounced on by soldiers, one of whom announces, "She wants all of us!" Were the assault not interrupted by a senior officer, the scene would be unwatchable.

"The Innocents" weaves several narrative strands into a complex of themes that sometimes pull against one another. Mathilde, serenely acted by Ms. de Laâge, is a beautiful, preternaturally wise and

compassionate young woman: a modern heroine undaunted by the horrors of the world. When a band of soldiers returns to the convent while she is there, her quick thinking saves the nuns from another harrowing round of assaults.

The movie gives her a semi-love story in her affair with a medical supervisor, Samuel (Vincent Macaigne), a soulful Jewish doctor. The screenplay (by Ms. Fontaine, Pascal Bonitzer, Sabrina B. Karine and Alice Vial, working from a concept by Philippe Maynial) depicts the relationship as a friendly romance of convenience by two lonely, overstressed people who may never meet again. When Mathilde returns to the convent, he accompanies her, and they work as a team to deliver the remaining babies.



The film takes care to distinguish the sisters from one another in their responses to a kind of brutality that the most naïve among them couldn't have imagined. Those with more worldly backgrounds are better able to cope. "The Innocents" resists the temptation to wallow in sentiment as the nuns give birth, and images of new mothers cuddling their newborns are kept to a minimum. What you feel is their agony, terror and confusion.

But the film surrenders to convention once a too-neat solution is found for the care of the little ones. It is a soggy end to an otherwise tough, troubling film whose images of brutality and helplessness are hard to shake.

"The Innocents" is most interested in exploring how the atrocities test the sisters' religious faith. As more of them give birth, the movie creates a complex group portrait. To a degree, Maria (Agata Buzek), the sister who showed up at the hospital begging for help, speaks for all of them when she describes the challenges and rewards of belief and self-sacrifice as "24 hours of doubt for one minute of hope."

The most complicated and compelling character is the severe Mother Abbess, who faces an excruciating choice between saving a baby's life and risking disgrace, or abandoning the infant. Ms. Kulesza's anguished performance conveys the weight of an almost unbearable choice, which she believes condemns her to eternal damnation.

In French, Polish and Russian with English Subtitles.

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## Monday, September 26, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A. O. Scott / NYT      Rated PG      128 Mins.

“Our Little Sister” begins with a couple waking up in bed. After some morning conversation, the woman dresses and leaves, and as she walks home, the soundtrack swells with string-heavy, melodramatic music. The lushness of the sound seems at odds with the plainness of the images, and this discrepancy establishes a tone that will last through the rest of this delicate and satisfying film. Characters may refrain from expressing the strong emotions that flow beneath the surface of their daily lives, but every so often the music will remind us of the existence of those feelings.

The effect is sometimes jarring, which is part of the point that the director, Hirokazu Kore-eda, is making about the complex and sometimes invisible cords of affection and duty that bind members of a family. One of the most reliable Japanese filmmakers currently working, Mr. Kore-eda specializes in low-key domestic dramas that take account of abandonment and loss as well as loyalty and love.

“Nobody Knows” (2005) is the story, based on news accounts, of a group of siblings fending for themselves in the Tokyo apartment where they had been left by their overwhelmed mother. “Still Walking” (2009) is grounded in the routines of an elderly couple whose surviving children have grown up and moved away. “Our Little Sister,” which is played in a breezier, more comical key than those earlier films, settles in with three adult sisters who live together in the house where they grew up. Their father left when they were young, and their mother had a marginal presence in their lives. She shows up now and then to dispense irrelevant advice. The main authority figure seems to have been a great-aunt.

At their father’s funeral in a faraway coastal town, the sisters — Sachi (Haruka Ayase), Yoshino (Masami Nagasawa) and Chika (Kaho) — discover another sibling, 13-year-old Suzu who seems destined for a pre-ball Cinderella existence with her unsympathetic stepmother. Suzu’s half sisters, to stay with the fairy-tale metaphor, do the Prince Charming job of rescuing her from that fate, bringing her to live with them. She enrolls in school, joins a soccer team, and becomes a helpful and cheerful member of the household.

“Our Little Sister,” adapted from a popular manga series by Akimi Yoshida, has a deceptively episodic plot. Seeming to wander through small incidents and mundane busyness, it acquires momentum and dramatic weight through a brilliant kind of narrative stealth. You are shaken, by the end, at how much you care about these women and how sorry you are to leave their company.

It’s possible to discern the ghostly outline of an American television sitcom in the movie’s structure. The four sisters are sharply drawn, their distinctive personalities a few crosshatchings away from caricature. Sachi is the responsible one, working long hours as a hospital nurse and scolding the others when they fall short of her standards. Yoshino, who works in a bank, is a little wilder. She likes to drink and has a history of bad boyfriends, including the good-looking loser she wakes up next to in the first scene. Chika is the kooky one, working in a sporting-goods store and maintaining a low-key relationship with an eccentric co-worker.

Suzu also finds a bit of romance, but the pursuit of love is peripheral to Mr. Kore-eda’s concerns. Sachi’s long, discreet affair with a married doctor is the most serious such relationship in the film — at least to the extent that it injects some complication into the plot — but it hardly represents an ideal of happiness. That is to be found at home, in the rush of breakfast or the weary calm of a late supper.

Food and drink play an important role in “Our Little Sister,” in particular the freshly caught baby eels that are a local delicacy and a link to the absent father. The most vividly drawn secondary character is the woman who runs the sisters’ favorite diner — another potential sitcom element treated with delicate realism.



Janet Malcolm once wrote of Chekhov’s stories that we swallow one “as if it were an ice, and we cannot account for our feeling of repletion.” Something similar can be said about this film, which goes down as easily as a sip of the plum wine the sisters brew and yet leaves the viewer both sated and intoxicated.

“Our Little Sister” is in Japanese, with English subtitles.

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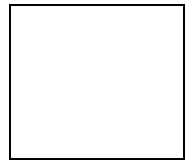
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# THE FITS

"A transfixing meditation on gender & self discovery."

*Hollywood Reporter*

Monday, August 22 at 7:30 pm

BONUS SCREENING AT OGDEN 6 THEATRE!  
"A stunning, delightful character study."

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Monday, August 29 at 7:30 pm

**PEGGY GUGGENHEIM  
ART ADDICT**

# THE INNOCENTS

"Mesmerizes . . . both gentle and painful."

*Seattle Times*

Monday, September 12 at 7:30 pm

"Irresistible... an intimate, warm embrace of a film that radiates joy and harmony."

*Dave Calhoun / Time Out*

Monday, September 26 at 7:30 pm

**ourlittlesister**  
a film by KORE-EDA HIROKAZU