

Monday, June 27, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Ronda Racha Penice | The Wrap | Not Rated | 110 Mins.

In a time when bigger is assumed to be better, especially in terms of budget and star power, "Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom" scored a surprising Oscar nomination for Best International Feature, the first ever for Bhutan, a country in the Himalayas with a population of less than 800,000.



In the COVID era, however, the film's core messaging of a simple life, where people help people and educators are worthy of honor and praise, resonates more strongly than ever. So many of us discovered the importance of these values during the pandemic, and Ugyen (Sherab Dorji), the film's protagonist, realizes it through a crisis of his own.

When we first meet Ugyen, he is an unsatisfied teacher working in Thimphu, the nation's capital, with dreams of escaping to Australia and becoming a singer, despite his grandmother's insistence that being a teacher and a civil servant is a better job than anything he will find abroad. Before he can do that, his government employers send him to the remote village of Lunana, accessible only by horse and foot, to finish out his contract.

If Ugyen finds the city unsatisfying, imagine his displeasure at giving up material comforts, such as listening to music and using his phone, to live in a region without regular electricity or even indoor plumbing. Regardless of how disgruntled Ugyen feels about this transfer, the villagers are ecstatic that he is there, greeting him like a king with all they have to offer. And while "all they have" isn't much by material standards, even he cannot resist the power of pure kindness where people give so freely of their few possessions.

In Lunana, education is so hard to come by that it is highly treasured. What he finds are students so eager to learn that they come to find him if he is late. Charged with this duty is class captain Pem Zam (her real name), whose optimism is boundless and

completely untainted by the unfortunate cards she's been dealt, including an alcoholic father. One student even tells him that Ugyen wants to be a teacher like him "because a teacher touches the future."

The yak, Ugyen learns, is a valuable asset in Lunana, something he realizes firsthand as he grows accustomed to using the animal's dung as fuel for stoves and heaters. At one point, he is even granted a yak of his own — Norbu, who, as the film's title reveals, resides in the classroom. In time, Ugyen finds himself warming not just to the people but also to the culture, even recalling bits that he had forgotten from his own childhood. Where he once sang Western songs, he now embraces those of the village, particularly "Yak Lebi Lhadar," in praise of the celebrated animal, frequently sung by the beautiful Saldon (Kelden Lhamo Gurung) on top of the mountain as an offering.

Taking it a step further, he begins to use those songs to teach his students. Ugyen's presence is so powerful that Asha (Kunzang Wangdi), the village's wise leader, begins to sing again, something he hadn't done in the many years since his wife's death. And the change in Asha suggests that Ugyen has an even more divine and powerful connection to Lunana, one that conjures up the richest folklore.

What first-time director Pawo Choyning Dorji — who attended college in the U.S. and is the son of a Bhutanese diplomat — achieves is a reminder of how cinema can connect us to what matters most in life, sharing a specific story from a part of the world most of us will never experience, but zoning in on matters of the heart that resonate in a universal way. "Lunana" is also a testament to the vitality of making cinema available to those without standard resources: The actors are all novices, with many of them never even having seen a movie before, and the production was shot on digital cameras that relied upon solar power as the area's main energy source.



The taste of Oscar voters is often questioned, but they get it right here. "Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom" is more than what Ang Lee calls a "breath of fresh air"; it's an affirmation that all films, however humble their origin, can matter and be counted. In Bhutanese with English Subtitles.

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PLAYGROUND

Monday, July 18, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Chloe Walker | Paste Magazine | Not Rated | 72 Mins.

There's a moment when you go from just watching a movie to becoming fully ensnared by it. Sometimes that moment never comes, and you spend the whole runtime at a slight but significant remove. Sometimes it arrives partway through, with the onset of an unexpected revelation, or the introduction of a new character. And sometimes—rarely—it occurs within seconds. The film has barely started, and you're immediately in its grasp.

That's what happens in *Playground*, the intense debut feature from Belgian writer/director Laura Wandel. We open straight on a close-up of the weeping face of a young girl, who's clinging on to her older brother for dear life. She is Nora (Maya Vanderbeque), and it's her first day of school; Abel (Günter Duret) is a few years ahead. She's eventually prised off of him, and continues her terrified trip towards those imposing doors while clutching tight onto the hand of her dad (Karim Leklou), until an offscreen voice tells them that parents can't enter the school with their children. So Nora's dad crouches down, gives her a hug—he looks just a little less distraught than she does—and sends her off. After one last run back to him for a final embrace, she's as ready as she's ever going to be.



Wandel makes a host of great decisions throughout the course of *Playground*, but by far the most effective is to shoot the whole film from Nora's height. We are placed at her side in a visceral, destabilizing way; although many of the people who watch this movie won't be able to remember their very first day at school, Wandel plunges us into the utter terror of being ripped from the comfort of home and thrust into a huge building full of strangers who are all taller than us—and a lot louder too. Wandel heightens

the discomfort further by shooting in shallow focus, making the other kids into intimidatingly fast and noisy blurs. And for the entire duration, we never venture further from the building than the school gates. *Playground's* original French title was *Un Monde*—literally “A World”—and it does often seem like Nora and Abel's school is a universe unto itself.

After her panicked arrival, Nora eventually starts to settle into that new world: We smash cut from the frightened hunch of her shoulders as she's about to jump into the pool to her giggling during a snowball fight. As her brother promised she would, she has made friends. For Abel, however, it's a different story. He's being bullied, and viciously; at one point Nora sees his classmates apparently trying to drown him in a toilet bowl. He begs her not to tell anyone, but she can't keep secrets from her dad, and soon the bullies are hauled into a meeting with Nora's family and the principal. After soliciting flimsy apologies, he seems to be satisfied: “I'm sure the four of you are able to get along now, right?” The naiveté of grown-ups. Wandel's camera is trained on Nora's increasingly agonized face throughout the whole meeting; she knows it's going to get worse. And it does.

While the grown-ups aren't all as useless as the school principal, they also aren't particularly useful; it doesn't help that the number of staff overseeing the playground—the center of Abel's nightmare—is so clearly insufficient. Maintaining the frame at Nora's height means that the adults are largely kept offscreen, or just visible as a pair of talking legs (not dissimilar to their presentation in the *Peanuts* universe). Unless they deign to lower themselves to child level—like her dad and her favorite teacher (Laura Verlinden)—they are quite literally out of the picture. However well-intentioned the adults may be, in the world of *Playground*, it's up to the kids to solve their own problems.

Nora starts the movie as a burden to Abel, but as the year progresses, it's Abel who becomes Nora's burden. His bullying grows so widespread, his toxic reputation starts to impinge upon her own delicate social status. Having tried all she can to help him, only worsening his suffering by telling adults, the situation appears hopeless to her. Her frustration at her powerlessness becomes frustration at her brother. It's difficult to think of a more searing recent cinematic depiction of that old truism, “hurt people hurt people” than the one Wandel presents us with. The kids in *Playground* lob their misery between them like a hot potato; although we don't learn anything about the backstories of Abel's original tormentors, you can bet that they had tormentors of their own. The very definition of a vicious circle.

Many years removed from the manifold horrors, it's easy to minimize or resort to cliché when we talk about school days. Memories dull with time, and so does pain, but *Playground* brings it all flying back into sharp, sharp focus. Wandel's movie is immersive and bruising, full of empathy for its young characters, and unrelenting in its depiction of the challenges they face. And it makes you wonder, with utmost sincerity—how did any of us ever reach adulthood in one piece? In French with English subtitles.

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PETITE MAMAN

Monday, July 25, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Justin Chang | Los Angeles Times | Not Rated | 72 Mins.

To be a mother or a daughter (or both) in the movies these days is to find oneself locked in a bitter cycle of generational angst, one so laced with resentment and adversarial feeling that only a supernatural crisis, apparently, can bring forth the possibility of reconciliation. What does it take for the two of them to see eye-to-eye — to regard each other not as clueless authoritarians or ungrateful dependents but as unique and vulnerable individuals, deserving of sympathy rather than scorn? In the recent animated comedy “Turning Red,” it requires some ancient shape-shifting sorcery. In the live-action multiverse fantasia “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” it’s an apocalyptic attack on human life, a threat that can only be neutralized through a bold declaration of mother-daughter love.

“Petite Maman,” the quietly spellbinding new film from French writer-director Céline Sciamma, proposes a gentler but no less radical alternative. The encounter at the heart of this movie, which runs just 72 minutes and will haunt you for long afterward, is magical precisely because of how seemingly unmagical it is. Notably, it arrives as a bittersweet balm for a relationship that, far from being combative, is suffused with warmth and tenderness. A heart-crushing early scene of 31-year-old Marion (Nina Meurisse), driving home while her 8-year-old, Nelly (Joséphine Sanz), passes her munchies from the backseat, tells you everything you need to know about their mutual adoration.

Which is not to say that there’s nothing left for Marion and Nelly to discover about themselves or each other — quite the contrary. Marion has just lost her own mother after a long illness, and in the days that follow, she and her husband (Stéphane Varupenne) go about the solemn task of cleaning out the house in which she grew up. Nelly, who was close to her grandmother but frets about not having wished her a proper goodbye, distracts herself by poring over her mom’s old homework assignments and playing in the surrounding woods. That’s where she meets another 8-year-old who looks just like her, with the same long brown hair and sharp, far-reaching gaze. She’s played by Gabrielle Sanz (Joséphine’s identical twin sister), and her name is Marion.

From this simple, suggestive conceit — and also from the warm, autumnal hues of Claire Mathon’s exquisite images — Sciamma weaves an enchanted reverie, a mystery in miniature that hums with resonance and implication. “Petite Maman,” recently named the best non-English-language film of 2021 by the Los Angeles Film Critics Assn., surveys the landscape of childhood with a clear-eyed wonderment worthy of Victor Erice and Hayao Miyazaki. Is the younger Marion an imaginary friend, an invention of Nelly’s active mind? Or is she truly the child version of Nelly’s mother, which might account for the adult Marion’s sudden disappearance from the premises? Has the weight of this family’s grief temporarily ruptured the fabric of time and space, allowing past and present members to walk side by side?

Sciamma has little interest in explanations, and she slyly passes along that disinterest to her characters. Nelly, though as naturally inquisitive as any child, doesn’t bother questioning the strangeness of her circumstances, possibly because they don’t feel particularly strange. Neither does young Marion, who soon leads Nelly back

through the woods to her house, which is, of course, an earlier version of the house Nelly herself is visiting. We spend a lot of time in both homes, following the girls back and forth between near-identical planes of reality. A world of unadorned walls and sparse furnishings, of giggly pancake breakfasts and hushed nighttime whispers, drifts in and out of focus.

The girls are not entirely alone during these visits. Nelly meets a younger version of her grandmother (Margot Abascal), also named Nelly, whose stern but kindly presence heightens the intimacy and gravity of the situation. (It also gives her younger namesake the chance to say goodbye as she intended.) Young Marion in turn meets young Nelly’s friendly, easily distracted dad, a.k.a. her own future husband — a potentially mind-bending twist that barely pierces the gossamer membrane of Sciamma’s conceit. “Petite Maman” generates continual surprise and delight, paradoxically, by treating even the strangest circumstances with a wry matter-of-factness.

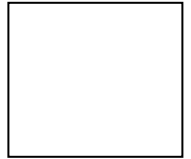
It also instinctively grasps — and draws inspiration from — the creative logic of children at play. Nelly and Marion spend much of their time together devising games, whether they’re working on the large conical hut that Marion built in the woods or acting out a hilariously elaborate murder mystery. “Petite Maman” itself plays a kind of game with the viewer, and for all its aversion to exposition, it’s deft enough to lay down a few ground rules. We learn to tell the girls apart through sartorial cues — Nelly favors ponytails and blue tones, while Marion wears headbands and shades of red — but also, increasingly, through nuances of dialogue and mercurial flickers of facial expression. At times we stop trying to tell them apart at all, so serenely perfect is the sight of them simply inhabiting the same space and enjoying each other’s company.

The casting of the Sanz sisters is a bold formal coup that initiates a curious line of inquiry. Their characters are distinct people with distinct childhood experiences: The 8-year-old Marion, we learn, is about to undergo a medical procedure, and her father, unlike Nelly’s, doesn’t appear to be in the picture. But what binds them seems no less significant: not just the same face, voice and gestures but a common curiosity about the world, a shared capacity for exuberance and melancholy. To be able to appreciate and understand a parent for the individual she once was — and to recognize a glimmer of yourself in that lost history — is a gift granted to few people, and it’s one that Sciamma manages to unlock here through her singular mix of discipline and imagination.

Her rigor is undeniable (as is the spareness and precision of Julien Lacheray’s editing), but her approach never feels deterministic. Apart from her knack for finding perfectly gorgeous images — the vibrancy of crisp autumn leaves in a forest clearing, the play of shadows at the edge of a child’s bed — Sciamma’s great hallmark as a filmmaker is that she gives her characters the space to figure out who they are and what they might become. This was true of the young protagonists of “Tomboy” and “Girlhood,” and also of the romantic leads of “Portrait of a Lady on Fire,” two women granted a passionate, life-changing respite from the prying eyes of the outside world.

While the central relationship here is a friendship — and a blood bond — rather than a romance, “Petite Maman” presents its characters with a similar kind of freedom. And that freedom is no less meaningful for being so fleeting. No less than the condition of childhood itself, the movie opens up a world of possibilities, all of them beautiful and beguiling — and over all too soon. In French with English Subtitles.

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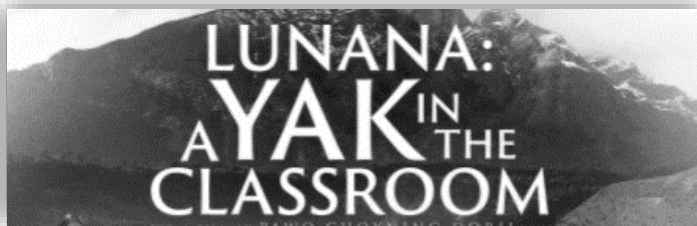
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film about the importance of education and
the preservation of tradition and nature."

--Rene Sanchez, *Cine Sin Fronteras*

Monday, June 27 at 7:30 pm

"One of the year's boldest and best directorial debuts."

--*View of the Arts*

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PETITE MAMAN

"Spellbinding. A moving jewel of a film."

--*The Guardian*

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