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**To Be and  
To Have**

A FILM BY NICOLAS PHILIBERT

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This beautiful and inspirational film concerns a dedicated and gifted teacher whose world is a one-room schoolhouse in the French countryside. The film charts teacher and class over the course of one academic year, and takes a warm and serene look at the primary education process at its best. Magical and poetic, this is a film of small miracles.

FRANCE • 2002 • 104 mins • Color • In French with English subtitles

# "TO BE AND TO HAVE"

**A documentary about a single-room schoolhouse in rural France, offers up a poignant vision of how a teacher can shape lives.**

BY PETER RAINER

"Lopez is the apotheosis of all the great schoolteachers we wish we had" Georges Lopez, the schoolteacher in Nicolas Philibert's great documentary *To Be and to Have*, has a soft-bearded, ruminative face and vigilant eyes. He's been instructing children in the Auvergne region in France for twenty years and now, in his mid-fifties, is ready to retire. The film chronicles his final year, and it's one of the most emotionally gratifying movies about teaching ever made. It recalls the best films of Frederick Wiseman.

In the single-classroom arrangement, which is practiced less and less in France nowadays, children from kindergarten through primary school are taught in one big classroom by the same teacher; each age group occupies its own corner. Lopez moves deftly back and forth between them, adjusting his style to fit the children's needs. He rarely tells students to just do something; instead, he gently questions them in Socratic fashion until they are able to discover their thoughts and feelings for themselves. When the children are distressed or misbehaving, he is careful to let them know his displeasure in ways they can understand.

His patience is due, I think, to much more than a calm disposition. Lopez's connection to children is based on the implicit understanding that their feelings are as valid and complex as any adult's. And this is the principle that guides Philibert as well. He spent a great deal of time trying to find the right teacher for his



film, and in Lopez he found more than a good subject. He found a soul mate.

Lopez is the apotheosis of all the great schoolteachers we wish we had (or were lucky to have had). It's one thing to see movies like *Dead Poets Society* and *Goodbye Mr. Chips*; they carry a built-in nostalgia for a way of schooling—a way of life, really—that is no more. But *To Be and*

*to Have* has a far greater emotional impact because it demonstrates without overreaching what an actual teacher can do to shape lives. Lopez doesn't deny the harshness of his children's problems. When a girl, who may be autistic, lets on that she is afraid of middle school, he tells her that she can still visit him—her new school isn't far away—but he doesn't gloss over her difficulties. When another student breaks down because of a parent's illness, Lopez tells the boy that sickness is a part of life. He isn't trying to be a father to these kids—not even when it's clear they want him to be. He is gratified by their attentions and by what they give back to him. The son of a Spanish-immigrant farmhand and a French mother, he says he wanted to be a teacher even when he was a schoolkid, and it's easy to believe him. Near the end, the children say good-bye one by one to Lopez, and those alert eyes of his mist up. The emotional honesty of this movie rescues it from sentimentality. *To Be and to Have* is about more than a dedicated teacher and his pupils; it's about how difficult and exhilarating it is to grow into an adult.

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