

Blu-ray Review: 'Monsieur Lazhar' Stands as One of the Year's Best Films

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- [Blu-ray Review](#) [2]
- [Émilien Néron](#) [3]
- [Evelyne de la Chenelière](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [6]
- [Mohamed Fellag](#) [7]
- [Monsieur Lazhar](#) [8]
- [Music Box Films](#) [9]
- [Philippe Falardeau](#) [10]
- [Sophie Nélisse](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – When the Academy nominates a film before it's even been released in America, they end up doing it a disservice. Once the film finally shows up on American screens, the Oscar nominations have already faded from memory. This method also allows the Academy to ignore all the great films that audiences have actually seen during the past twelve months.

Instead of nominating a widely praised gem like Abbas Kiarostami's "Certified Copy," which received a March 2011 U.S. release, for the 2011 Oscars, the Academy chose unknown pictures such as Philippe Falardeau's "Monsieur Lazhar," which didn't receive a U.S. release until April 2012. But as Lou Lumenick recently reminded me via Twitter, critics can do whatever they want. Thus, I am declaring "Monsieur Lazhar" as one of the very best films of 2012, and the only one (so far) that has caused me to weep.



Blu-ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Perhaps I'm a sucker for scenes where a character burdened with pent-up emotion finally has a cathartic breakdown in which the tears are as healing as they are heartbreaking. I'll never forget the scene in David Schwimmer's "Trust" where a young teen (played brilliantly by Liana Liberato) finally comes to the realization that she had been raped, and that the relationship she had idealized wasn't a relationship at all. There's a scene late in "Monsieur Lazhar" that conjures a similarly overwhelming emotional power and hinges largely on the stunningly unaffected work of two child actors, Sophie Nélisse and Émilien Néron, both of whom are making their film debut. Néron plays Simon, a boy who discovers the body of his beloved teacher, Martine, hanging from a noose in her classroom. The filmmaking in this opening sequence is utterly masterful, as cinematographer Ronald Plante allows the audience to discover the body at the same moment that Simon does, while viewing it solely from his limited perspective, since it is this view that will be burned in the boy's mind for the rest of his life. The camera remains fixed in front of the classroom door as Simon desperately runs for help, while his friend, Alice (Nélisse, a dead ringer for "My Girl"-era Anna Chlumsky) stumbles upon the unseemly sight. It's not long before Alice starts shooting glares of judgment at Simon, who she believes was somehow responsible for the tragedy. The confusion racking Alice's mind has become intrinsically linked with her sorrow over the disappearance of yet another adult role model to fill the void left by her distant mother.



Monsieur Lazhar was released on Blu-ray and DVD on August 28, 2012.

Photo credit: Music Box Films

Enter Bachir Lazhar (Mohamed Fellag), an Algerian immigrant in Montreal who swiftly volunteers to be the late teacher's replacement. Fellag's performance is quietly devastating, as his twinkly smile proves to mask an ocean of sadness. He cares about the children not just as students but as individuals, and his need to care for them stems from his own paternal instincts, which were left hanging after his family was literally engulfed by tragedy. While much of the school's staff favors a hands-off approach with their students, Lazhar encourages his kids to open up about their pain, inspiring Alice to write her feelings down on paper. When Lazhar's proposition to distribute Alice's written piece throughout the school is deemed "disrespectful" to Martine, he reasonably asks, "Was it respectful of her to commit suicide at school?" "Monsieur Lazhar" holds many truths about the grieving process, but unlike many recent foreign film nominees, it's anything but an interminable dirge. There's a great deal of humor and warmth to spare in this picture, and for all of its stark authenticity, its overarching tone is resoundingly hopeful. This is a masterpiece well worth celebrating.

"Monsieur Lazhar" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) and includes a 21-minute interview with Falardeau conducted by Annemiek Schrijver, as well as the audition tapes of Nélisse and Neron, who sparked off each other almost instantly. The finest extra, by far, is a half-hour discussion between Falardeau and Evelyne de la Chenelière, the Canadian writer whose one-man play, "Bashir Lazhar," served as the film's source material. She was worried that child actors would push the material into sentimental territory, and was attracted by the challenge of exploring a character whose life experience was far different from her own. The featurette juxtaposes footage of videotaped stage performances with Falardeau's versions of the same scenes in the final cut. Certain details—such as the methods Martine utilized to hang herself—had to be altered from Chenelière's more poetic text in order to make logical sense. The final monologue also was rewritten in order to leave audiences with a metaphorical image that was powerful in its simplicity (Chenelière admits that she prefers the film version). Since the director disliked using flashbacks, he found ways to convey Lazhar's past through various wordless moments, such as when he reconnects with his Eastern sensuality by dancing to familiar music in the emptiness of his classroom. Though we never get a glimpse of Lazhar's life in Algeria, Falardeau and Fellag triumphantly show us a man in full.

'Monsieur Lazhar' is released by Music Box Films and stars Mohamed Fellag, Sophie Nélisse, Émilien Neron, Marie-Ève Beauregard, Vincent Millard, Seddik Benslimane, Louis-David Leblanc, Gabriel Verdier, Marianne Soucy-Lord, Danielle Proulx, Brigitte Poupart and Jules Philip. It was written and directed by Philippe Falardeau. It was released on August 28, 2012. It is rated PG-13.



[13]

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- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/mohamed-fellag>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/monsieur-lazhar>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/music-box-films>
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