

The Emperor's Club

A Foreword by Ethan Canin

What is, perhaps, most wonderful about the Emperor's Club, in my opinion, is that it manages to be so gripping and so moving without resorting to the usual Hollywood menu: there is no car chase, no explosion, no special effects. And except for a brief twirling appearance inside the office of a United States senator, no gun. Instead, the movie operates on a single classical principle: **character**. And let me tell you, the most difficult achievement in narrative art-I know, because it's the same in fiction writing- is to deeply involve an audience in a realistic, human-scale story of words and small actions. In a word: a drama of **character**.

It's easier to make a gripping war movie. (More expensive and more technically complex, yes but nonetheless easier.) It's easier to make a tear-jerker in which a ship sinks or a nation is attacked or a storm hits: it's easier to seduce an audience when the scenery is futuristic or the lives are larger than life heroes, geniuses, outlaws. What's truly difficult, and thus in my opinion the highest art, is to make drama of realistic proportions, to make drama of characters who do nothing more heroic than what you or I might do. Of characters who, as Mother Teresa once put it, "do small things with great love."

And that is exactly what this movie does. In the end Hundert the teacher comes back to teaching. His small thing. Performed with fervor and, yes, great love. And what Hundert learns is that his internal peace comes not from power-although he, too, is tempted by the throne--but from the small acts of reverence, encouragement, and generosity that are a teacher's life.

Hundert is not a small man, but he is not a great man either, and that we care so deeply about his proscribed life is a testament to this movie's skill. Imagine trying to pitch these scenes to a studio executive. There's nothing flamboyant to point to. Nothing catastrophic. Nothing heroic. Yet when Hundert - pensively, pensively, as though he already knows what will come of this - considers changing a quiz grade, every theater in which I've ever seen this movie grows entirely silent. Changing a quiz grade! Icy water isn't flowing into the full! The nuclear reactor isn't leaking! He's a high school teacher thinking about padding a few points on a quiz.

And everyone's rivetted.

I hope this movie succeeds. Not only because I find it so wonderful, but also because I would like Hollywood to know that realistic dramas about serious subjects, about un-hip subjects, are what many of us are looking for in movies. I'll admit that every time I see this film - and seen it quite a few times - tears are in my eyes. They are in my eyes when the young Sedgewick Bell flatly stares down his teacher - his teacher! - and with a Machiavellian flourish displays the notes taped inside his toga; they are in my eyes when the same boy, now Senate-bound, scoffs at Hundert's still hopeful lecture on integrity; they are in my eyes when Deepak

Mehta reads the simply lines from the plaque - "Great teachers have little external history to record; their lives go over into other lives"; and they are in my eyes at the end, when the adult Martin Blythe waves his wand - so poignantly open - in a gesture of forgiveness that crowns the movie.

Martin Blythe has been a solider - he limps from a war wound - and to me that wave looks like a statue. In fact, I like to think of it as one. A salute to the idea that integrity matters. That compassion matters. That generosity matters. That the ideas Hundert extols to his classes, the noble credentials of the human race - learning, compassion, democracy - will be carried forward alongside the old curses of greed and war and tyranny.

The Emperor's Club has been called a movie about morality - but I would only partially agree. To me, it is more a movie about compassion. When Hundert changes Sedgewick Bell's grade, he starts both of them down a tricky incline: this act might indeed be seen by many as a moral failure, and indeed by some as the defining moment in Sedgewick Bell's rotten future. But let me tell you, if I were in Hundert's place, I would have done the same thing myself - and I wouldn't want to be friends with anybody who can say with certainty that he would not have. For Hundert's error is an error of kindness.

He changes that grade because he was trying to help a boy, a boy who, as the story puts it, is "struggling gamely from beneath the formidable umbra of his father." And what I cherish about Kevin Kline's ranging and subtle performance in this movie is how we see this in his eyes: they are never the condemning eyes of a moralist. Even when he speaks Socrates' famous admonition about living rightly, even when he lectures the utterly corrupt Sedgewick Bell about integrity; even at these moments, they remain the encouraging eyes of a teacher.

The ending of this movie is entirely the work of the screenwriter. Neil Tolkin, and the director, Michael Hoffman, and it is an ending I love. Not the triumph of morality, for this movie is too clear-eyed for a triumph (not to mention the fact that Sedgewick Bell is about to win a Senate seat). Not a triumph at all, really. but merely the regeneration of an emotion that everyone knows is risky: hope.

You can't live in our world and not be suspect of trust, not be tempted to set aside faith in humanity. Our welfare system has certainly produced its cheats; just as have our corporations (at the moment, a rather impressive list of them). The world as I write is more threatening to an American than it has been in most of our lifetimes. And I suppose Hundert would say that one of the dangers here is that even on the smallest scale, the scale to which Mother Teresa was referring, we will begin to poll back. That's why Hundert returns to teaching. He is not retreating. He's been wounded: his gullibility - his faith in his students - is the dagger that has been turned against him; but still he goes back.

I would not be writing this if I had not had such a wonderful experience with the cast and crew of this movie. From the start, the people who made this have been welcoming in a way that

a fiction writer can only hope for in secret. Special among them have been Andy Kirsch - the moment this movie became real to me was when, from a thousand miles away, Andy held up his cell phone so that I could hear Deepak Mehta's slyly quiet answer and the riotous applause of the students; Neil Tolkin, who turned the inferiority of the short story into such palpable and beguiling drama; Michael Hoffman, who has listened (sometimes for hours) to my thoughts and worked so artfully and intelligently-not to mention, doggedly-to make this the extraordinary movie it is; and Kevin Kline, not only for his acting, which is superlative. but also for his stewardship of this material, which felt exactly like my own.

I cannot end without acknowledging the beautiful work of the kids: Emile Hirsch, whose nuanced portrayal of Sedgewick Bell is truly extraordinary; Jesse Eisenberg. Risk Mehta, Paul Dano, and Gibe Millman, whose sympathetic and diverse performances bring a whole new depth to the story. I didn't think teenagers could pull off such reach and complexity.

This movie, so antiquated in its props, could not be more topical. The news continues: Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen, Merrill Lynch, Adelphia, Tyco. As Senator Bell says, "What's the good of what you're teaching than boys?"