

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2022/23 SEASON



UN MONDE
(PLAYGROUND)
(Language: French)

Director-screenwriter: Laura Wandel, 2021. Running time: 72 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 3rd October, 2022.

[*Un Monde*] “*Playground* is not a psychological drama, per se, but it could be. Belgian director Laura Wandel’s jarring debut feature plunges headlong into the world of school-aged children and observes their dynamics with chilling precision. It generously studies its subjects — children, bullying, adults confronting the implications of the latter — and extracts haunting conclusions about the Darwinian nature of ostensibly idyllic settings.

[Being the first day of school] Nora (Maya Vanderbeque), the protagonist, struggles to part ways with her father (Karim Leklou). The 7-year-old’s nervousness is palpable and not easily assuaged by her dad’s reassuring remarks. She, unlike her less apprehensive older brother Abel (Gunter Duret), is a new kid.

A gripping and haunting portrayal of childhood. Nora eventually heads into the unfamiliar world of her elementary school. With the help of cinematographer Frédéric Noirhomme, Wandel shoots *Playground* from Nora’s perspective — a bold choice rewarded by an intoxicatingly immersive narrative. The world looks different, more menacing, from the vantage point of a four-foot child. Adult bodies become gigantic; the crowded school halls, brimming with energy, are chaotic; the cafeteria is a jungle of implied social mores; and the playground is perilous terrain. After enduring her morning classes, Nora tries to sit with her brother during lunch only to be turned away by a teacher. The bodiless voice insists that she must eat with her peers.

Recess proves to be the most daunting part of the day. Initially without friends, Nora clings to Abel, who runs with an older crowd of bullies. He repeatedly rejects her attempts to play, warning that if she doesn’t stay away from him, she’s liable to become a target.

But it’s Abel’s fate that takes a turn. Days later, Nora comes across her brother’s “friends” beating him up. At first, she tries to stop them herself and then begs her brother to defend himself. He simply tells her not to get involved or to snitch.

Abel's situation thrusts Nora into the thick of a tricky dilemma, which Wandel expertly handles. Assuming the perspective of a child can be risky. "When writers overidentify with their child characters, both innocence and experience get cloying," the critic Margo Jefferson wrote in 2004. "Dramatically, the adults are oversimplified, too. After all, there's a lot children can't see or choose not to." Jefferson was referring to stage plays, but her analysis also applies to films, which are just as predisposed to abusing a child's perspective. *Playground* avoids this issue by taking Nora's experience seriously, resulting in a narrative that rings true even if it sometimes registers as opaque.

Saving Abel subsumes Nora, and the plans she hatches change as she becomes more aware of and attuned to the rules of the playground — and the school. At first, she tries to alert the teachers and chaperones, but they are distracted, arriving too late to the scene, or inept, insisting that fighting at Abel's age (which is never specified in the film) is normal.

Understandably dissatisfied with those responses, Nora tells her father, who, at first, takes matters into his own hands. His misguided intervention only makes things worse. A particularly brutal bullying session lands Abel, Nora and the bullies in the principal's office. The confessions from the accused are labored and their apologies forced, but the adults feel satisfied and think, naively, that everyone will get along now.

But that's not how the playground works, and Wandel, whose film runs a brisk 72 minutes, dedicates *Playground*'s third act to investigating the aftermath of this meeting. Abel loses his crew and begins bullying another kid, a turn of events that Nora struggles to make sense of. She, on the other hand, becomes a social pariah, losing the few friends she's managed to make because of her brother's reputation as a coward.

Vanderbeque impressively handles Nora's moods, shifting from nervousness and despair to anxiety and rage within seconds. No longer motivated by trying to protect Abel, Nora fashions her own identity and tries to figure out her place among her peers. She begins to see Abel as a source of her problems and lashes out at him. Despite its subject matter, *Playground* is not a call to action masked as a film. It's a gripping work of observation more concerned with identifying patterns, teasing out motivations and laying bare the reality of how we come to relate to one another."

Lovia Gyarke, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21st December, 2021.