

## Untouchable (Intouchables) (15) France 2011

8 April 2019

DIRECTORS: **Olivier Nakache** and **Éric Toledano** Running time: 112 minutes (French with English subtitles)

LEADING PLAYERS: **François Cluzet** (Philippe), **Omar Sy** (Driss), **Anne Le Ny** (Yvonne), **Audrey Fleurot** (Magalie). **Alba Gaïa Bellugi** (Elisa).

SCRIPT: **Olivier Nakache** and **Éric Toledano** based on the book *Le second souffle* by **Philippe Pozzo di Borgo**.

PHOTOGRAPHY: **Mathieu Vadepied**. EDITING: **Reynald Bertrand**. MUSIC: **Ludovico Einaudi**.

*Intouchables*, the Weinstein film that broke box office records in France and flounced its easy charm across the pond, is true to its pedigree in offering a sanitised, nay gilded, image of both physical incapacity and the care worker's role.

The scenario, in which former jailbird off the estates (Omar Sy) seeks to assure his benefits by applying for a job he is totally unqualified to do, namely, to act as personal carer to a multi-millionaire art collector (François Cluzet), is off-the-peg social comedy masquerading as Loachian cinéma engagé. Notice how when we see Driss on his HLM estate the lighting is flat, the framing up close and unsteady. Meanwhile, on entering the baroque world of recluse, Philippe, lighting and framing become more conventional, not to say glamorised: rich browns and golds dominate, and, his P.A. (Audrey Fleurot) is as beautiful as she is glacial, all the better to be melted by the wide-boy charisma and well-concealed heart of gold of the bluff newcomer. (Hard not to think of Harvey W. in these scenes!

At the same time, we are not spared the less savoury details of Driss's new duties, though they are conveniently outlined in dialogue for us by the no-nonsense day nurse, Marcelle. Our focus is rather on the comic payload, with his adamant refusal to perform such tasks (instantly belied by an abrupt transition). Philippe's ability to foam at the mouth at will is elsewhere exploited in an opening sequence in which Driss avoids an uncomfortable encounter with the police after speeding by claiming that his passenger is having a life-threatening seizure.

The casting of the film is astute, though. Cluzet, best known to UK audiences from noughties success *Tell No One*, is an established star in France, while Omar Sy is a rising one (*Inferno*)

whose international career was made by this film. Both draw well on their respective talents and personae: the former masking vulnerability through dignity in a facially nuanced performance, the latter all physique and energy, a young bull in a china shop. How can we not fall for so cunning a package, provided we are periodically reminded of the true sadness at the story's core?

None of which is to deny that the film works on its own level, of course, but when we are shown a photograph of the real people behind the film, we are reminded – unwittingly, one must suppose – that we have been spun a Prospero-like vision of reality, with all that entails.

The English title, *Untouchable*, as often, does not quite cut it: the term is meant to evoke the untouchables of the Indian caste system, rather than incorruptibility. In this case both men are outcasts, misfits, prisoners of their self-pity; the one refuses to fit into society because of the chip on his shoulder, the other is physically ill-adapted. Their journey, in which they regain an appreciation of their own value as human beings, is also the template for a dozen or so Hollywood feelgood productions, from *Rain Man* to *Driving Miss Daisy*. Indeed, you need look no further than our own season (*City Lights*) to find a forbear of the same dynamic. No wonder, then, that the project was of interest to the Weinstein brothers, and drew such record receipts in its own country. Does this lessen its value as a work of cinema? As a piece of entertainment, of course not; as a work of importance socially and historically, certainly.

**David Clare**