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Radical (12a)

Dir: Christopher Zalla

**With: Eugenio Derbez, Daniel Haddad,
Jennifer Trejo**

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Synopsis: In an elementary school in a very poor community with corrupt officials and constant violence from gangs of drug dealers, new teacher Sergio joins the staff when one teacher leaves at the start of term. Most of the other teachers have given up on providing the children with a meaningful education because of neighbourhood violence, poor facilities and the reality that most children drop out to help their families or to join gangs. Sergio decides on a different approach that involves engaging children and posing questions rather than the rote learning favoured by the others and gradually begins to win them round.

“What use have we for such fantasies?” Paloma’s father asks her, upon finding a magazine about yachts in their shack, adjacent to the garbage heap they scavenge to survive in their Mexican border town. The magazine is part of the secret cache of publications that feed Paloma’s natural curiosity for science – recently sparked by her new teacher, Sergio. The distance between her impoverished reality and her lofty goal to become an aerospace engineer makes Paloma’s ambition seem a misplaced, even harmful fantasy. Her father argues as much in the film’s third act, when he finds a pamphlet on Space Camp given to Paloma by Sergio (Eugenio Derbez), the educator-as-hero in this charming if formulaic classroom drama.

Still, *Radical* seems to take Paloma’s father’s question seriously, cognisant that the film itself might be criticised of fantasising. As critics have argued of Hollywood entries in this sub-genre (see *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995), such films are, at best, naïve about the capacity of individual action to triumph over the socioeconomic obstacles they use as dramatic fodder. At worst, it is regressive: apology for collective inaction.

The fact that *Radical* is based on a real-life success story – that of Paloma Noyola and Sergio Correa, as reported in a 2013 *Wired* cover story – helps guard against such accusations. So too does the fate of the other two sixth graders highlighted (fictional composites, according to writer-director Christopher Zalla). The rate of triumph to tragedy is 1:3; Sergio is only able to save the one.

Almost as improbably as Paloma rises above Matamoros’ sinking conditions through Sergio’s tutelage, *Radical* rises above its heavy-handed script, loaded with clichés and familiar beats, through the loving attention and dynamism of its veteran filmmakers. (So



replete is *Radical* with metaphors of boats staying afloat and rocket-ships defying gravity that it’s hard to write about the film without them).

Cinematographer Mateo Londono uses vintage lenses and colour desaturation to match the film’s look to its themes. He makes Matamoros – and Sergio’s classroom – look dusty and poor, but also airy and filled with light. The convincing spontaneity of the classroom scenes are also a credit to the filmmakers and to Derbez, best-known to English-speaking audiences as a transformative teacher in another Sundance favourite, *CODA* (2021). Irresistible here as teacher-cum-lifeboat-captain, he has great rapport with the child actors and with Daniel Haddad as Chucho, a cynic-turned-believer school administrator, another cliché and another surrogate for the viewer’s conversion.

Whether or not this conversion to hope serves a conservative outlook (encouraging passivity about the status quo) or a progressive one (encouraging meaningful action towards changing it) depends on the viewer. It is towards the latter, *Radical* insists, that such galvanising fantasies can still be useful.

Credits

Sergio	Eugenio Derbez
Chucho	Daniel Haddad
Paloma	Jennifer Trejo
Lupe	Mía Fernanda Solís
Nico	Danilo Guardiola
Paloma’s father	Gilberto Barraza
Chepe	Victor Estrada
Enrique	Manuel Márquez
Jaime	Christian González
Maria	Xochiquetzal Martínez
Beto	Edmundo Moñoz
Administrator	Enoc Leño
Director	Christopher Zalla
Screenplay	Christopher Zalla, Joshua Davis
Cinematography	Luciano Larobina Matteo Londono
Editor	Eugenio Richer
Music	Pascual Reyes Juan Pablo Villa
	Mexico/USA 2023 126m

Another View

If there's one thing the movies have taught us, it's that the world loves the tale of an inspirational teacher who is working against the odds. From *The School Of Rock* to *Dead Poets Society* and *Dangerous Minds*, they're an almost constant part of the school curriculum - and if the kids are from a disadvantaged background of some sort or another then that gains extra points with producers. There's a reason why formulas work and this one is marked: Caution, may make you cry.

Radical is the new kid in this class - and it comes with a Mexican twist. Christopher Zalla's based-on-a-true-story cockle-warmer was one of this year's Day One films at Sundance and saw the writer/director return to the festival after his *Padre Nuestro* (later renamed *Sangre De Mi Sangre*) won the Grand Jury Prize back in 2007.

Those who caught Belfast inspirational teacher documentary *Young Plato* may also see a kindred spirit in action - although in a very different socioeconomic setting - as Sergio Juarez Correa (Eugenio Derbez) decides that his work with a group of 12-year-old school kids is going to be anything but textbook. On the first day, he upturns all the classroom tables and turns them into "lifeboats", dragging the children into a role play situation in which they need to practise maths skills to work out how to save the most people.

This is just the start of a lesson plan that is designed to engage the kids with ideas, philosophy and critical thinking. Sergio's plans are met with a general air of disdain from the rest of the school, although the worn down headmaster Chucho (Daniel Haddad) becomes an increasing ally as he gradually regrows his spine and sense of possibility. The town of Matamoros means these kids are up against it. Zalla impressively interweaves some of their stories early on, so that we see poverty is an ever-present and the gang life the main job many graduate into. Among them are Paloma (Jennifer Trejo), a maths whizz who lives by the municipal dump with her ailing dad but who dreams of being an astronaut and class joker Nico (Danilo Guardiola), whose brother is in tight with the local thugs and already using him as mule. We also see the life of young Lupe (Mía Fernanda Solís) in some detail, as she takes on the mum role for her siblings while her mum does night shifts. Signs of crime and deprivation are noticeable but kept to the fringes, which helps to ensure this doesn't just become an exercise in poverty porn.

Derbez puts in an open performance in the central role and the children respond in kind, making for an enjoyable crowdpleaser no matter how familiar some of the elements are. In fact, it's the director who threatens the air of naturalism at key moments by deciding to layer on the melodrama too thick. The scoring also becomes increasingly strident, which is simply unnecessary in the face of these unfussy and heartfelt performances.

Zalla deserves credit for retaining an element of realism that suggests being bright and engaged doesn't necessarily mean you'll triumph if the societal cards are stacked against you, although he ultimately leans into the positives as you might expect. You might not learn anything new about this sort of drama by watching this but it passes the tearjerk test with flying colours.

Amber Wilkinson; Eye for Film

Our next screening

Friday April 4th, 2025: 7.30pm

The Crime is Mine (15)

Never one to be defined by one particular style of film-making, François Ozon demonstrates his ability to treat serious subjects in a playful way without trivialising them. Nadia Tereszkiewicz plays Madeleine, an unsuccessful actress involved in an 'incident' with a film producer who is then found dead. Accused of his murder, she is persuaded to defend herself in public by her friend and equally unsuccessful lawyer, Pauline. Based on a 1930s play, the film barrels along in style, using familiar cinematic techniques, and is crowned by a scene-stealing performance by Isabelle Huppert.