

Movie Muse



by Peter Oppenheimer

It is with a certain amount of pride, approaching jubilation, that this edition of *Movie Muse* is devoted to an appraisal of a playful and penetrating documentary conceived, written, directed and produced by San Geronimo Valley's own Tom and Amy Valens and featuring our own Lagunitas School District's Open Classroom program. In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that I too am a life-long educator with a long time appreciation for and connection with the Open Classroom. My own two stepchildren went through and were

immensely benefited by this program, and several of my closest friends are adult alumni of the Open Classroom. *August to June* is the Valens' heartfelt and heartfelt testament to the wonders of childhood in general and the educational benefits of the Open Classroom in particular.

The Open Classroom is a creative and non-competitive school environment founded in 1972, in which the social, emotional and intellectual needs of each child are welcomed and addressed. Students take responsibility for planning their own day with certain group sessions to attend and assignments to complete but with lots of time to choose or initiate other activities. At the time of filming there were 90 students from kindergarten through 6th grade in the program. And *August to June* focuses on a single school year in the lives of 26 third and fourth graders.

The film's style and tone perfectly match its subject. To the casual observer the Open Classroom can appear to be chaotic, especially as compared to the regimentation of conventional schooling. Similarly, on the surface of the film, the short snippets and quick cuts can appear somewhat haphazard or chaotic, but beneath the surface and when taken in total, there emerges a strong undercurrent of meaning, purpose and growth. Much like the classroom it depicts, the documentary *August to June* is fast-paced, engaging and inspirational.

Excellent cinematography provides intimate portraits of these children who light up the screen and will win audience hearts. Although told in the voice and from the perspective of a teacher (Amy Valens), the stars of the film are the children, who are neither bullied into sitting still and following a strict program, nor shamed for misbehaviors even those that sometimes transgress the bounds of social grace. We get to watch up close and personal as conflicts are treated as opportunities for human bonding and creative outcomes. As Amy remarks in her voiceover narration, "Learning how to listen and be heard, developing an appreciation for other points of view, and the belief that problems can be resolved, are as basic to me as any academic skills."



Early in the film, we watch as the kids generate their own "Class Agreements," such as "If somebody says 'stop,' you should stop," and "Don't exclude." Would that the captains of industry and the lever-pullers of world power had learned such basic ground rules of social behavior.

We are treated to spontaneous student reactions to everything from fish guts to be used for fertilizer to being disrespected by a classmate. These impromptu interactions could not have been more compellingly scripted, and the film-makers are to be lauded for an expert selection and assembly of these many precious and fraught moments.

It is impressive and frankly quite thrilling to see, in addition to reading and writing,

students thoroughly engaged in carpentry, games, group discussions, charitable activities, puppetry, creating self-portraits, caring for plants and animals, becoming familiar with foreign languages, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments, baking, integrating and orienting new students, running, laughing, conducting scientific investigations, drawing, painting and making collages, reading their own poetry aloud, coaching each other, teaching the teacher, responding to parental involvement, engaging in individual, interpersonal and group problem solving, exploring, celebrating, creating a class newsletter and more.

True to its express ideal that education is a "drawing out" rather than a "driving in," *August to June* offers a very promising vision of education from the inside out, in which the teacher plays the role of facilitator and "midwife" rather than instructor or despot. Here is compelling evidence of the educational efficacy of the teacher following the child's interests and initiative rather than the other way around. Furthermore, for us as viewers or witnesses, it can be truly exhilarating to see school be a place of such adventure, discovery, growth, mystery, hilarity, community, collaboration, reflection and rejoicing. Where do I sign up?

To learn more about *August to June*, see clips, get news about upcoming screenings, learn how to host a screening, or to obtain a DVD, one can visit augusttojune.com

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