

My Life as a Courgette [PG] 2016|Switzerland/France|70 min

UK release date	2nd June 2017
Director	Claude Barras
Screenplay	Céline Sciamma
Cinematographer	David Toutevoix
Cast	Gaspard Schlatter (Courgette); Sixtine Murat (Camille); Paulin Jacond (Simon); Paul Ribera (Ahmed); Estelle Hennand (Alice); Elliot Sanchez (Jujube)

My Life As a Courgette is a wonderfully affecting French-Swiss stop-motion masterpiece based on Gilles Paris's book *Autobiographie d'une courgette*. Directed by feature first-timer Claude Barras from a screenplay by Girlhood writer-director Céline Sciamma, this tale of resilient children surviving abuse and abandonment may sound tough and unpalatable. Yet despite the spectre of parental alcoholism, drug addiction and worse, this beautifully tender and empathetic film addresses kids and adults alike in clear and compassionate tones that span – and perhaps heal – generations.

We first meet nine-year-old Icare, nicknamed Courgette, alone in his room, surrounded by crayons and empty beer cans, the detritus of a dysfunctional home life. Downstairs, his mother belches and curses at the television (“Liars! Filthy liars!”). A torn family photo establishes the absence of a father, a blank space on to which Courgette has projected fantastical dreams of a superdad. But after an altercation on the staircase (“I think I killed my mum”), he finds himself sent to a children’s home where, in the words of one resident: “We’re all the same. There’s nobody left to love us...”

Only the most hard-hearted viewer, however, could fail to love these youngsters, with their larger-than-life heads, long, lanky arms and minimally constructed faces upon which symphonies of understated emotions are registered. Each character is realised with deceptively simple strokes: Simon, the supposed bully with a telltale scar whose parents “took drugs all the time”; Jujube/Georgie, whose mother “went completely nuts” and made him eat toothpaste; Ahmed, the “girlie who wets his bed” as a result of post-traumatic stress; and Alice, who hides her

haunted eyes behind a shock of yellow hair and has nightmares about the “real creep” dad who’s now in jail.

Into this group comes Camille, a Kafka-reading enigma whose name and appearance echo that of Courgette, and whom he recognises as a kindred spirit. “It shines in her eyes,” he whispers, “that she saw it all”, a phrase that succinctly encapsulates the film’s deft use of enlarged windows to the soul.

Combining the poetic possibilities of animation with the down-to-earth dialogue of tough real lives (think Henry Selick meets Ken Loach), Barras succeeds brilliantly in his stated ambition to “make a film about children that speaks to them about abuse and its remedies in today’s world”.

Sciamma’s screenplay combines revealingly frank and poignant observations about disrupted lives with laugh-out-loud discussions of sex (“my parents had films... the man’s willy explodes”) and moments of tenderness made all the more powerful by their understatement. Subtly subversive, too, that the narrative should celebrate social workers and lend sympathetic voice to a policeman, all of whom are portrayed in an unfashionably nurturing light.

I watched both the subtitled French and the English-dubbed version, and while the former seemed marginally more melancholic, the latter still moved me to tears, buoyed up by Sophie Hunger’s plaintive music that perfectly accompanies the lyrical humanism of this lovely movie.

After Mark Kermode, The Observer, June 2017

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