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Oscar finalist 'Better Days' from China at Orinda Theatre

By Sophie Braccini



Image provided

The film "Better Days" (Shaonian de ni -) tells a dark story of bullying among Chinese teenagers. Games of domination and persecution turn deadly for several youths who live in a world where the question is either to be a bully or be bullied. The movie directed by Hong Kong native Derek Tsang is set Chongqing (China) and is played by Chinese actors speaking Mandarin (not Cantonese). It was Hong Kong's first Oscar nomination in 28 years.

When comes the time of the gaokao (Chinese national exam before entering college), the entire country focuses on the outcome. Close to 10 million high school students take this national entrance to university exam that singularly determines the students' placement and future economic status. In the weeks leading to the exam, students are submitting to intense cramming and the pressure is extreme.

Chen Nian is a lonely good student who wants to only focus on the coming exam. The shy young girl lives with a mother who seems to be a professional scammer and is often on the road. When one of Chen's classmates commits suicide, she shows compassion in front of the entire school. It soon surfaces that the dead girl had been submitted to unrelenting bullying. Chen, who must muster the courage to report them, soon becomes the next target. Isolated at school and socially, Chen finds an unlikely ally in Xiao Bei, a young hooligan who has learned the skills to survive in the streets. An improbable alliance and friendship flourishes between the two, but a spiral of violence is set in motion that will take lives along the way.

School bullying is the all-important center topic of this movie, exploring mainly the emotion of the victims and the strategies developed to counter it. The other aspect is the romantic friendship between the two teenagers whose life outlook differs considerably but who share the same loneliness and courage. The film is poignant and brilliantly interpreted by the two young main characters: Zhou Dongyu as Chen and Jackson Yee as Xiao. The depiction of the two is realistic and nuanced, however the secondary characters are often a caricature either all good or all bad with no nuance and not enough depth. Also, the second part of the movie becomes overly melodramatic and too long.

But one aspect of the movie that is fascinating is the societal picture it represents. The students are under what can only be described as a quasi-military dictatorship focusing on academic excellence and performance. The pressure is relentless, driven by the teachers that lead continuous intense cramming sessions, red banners hang on the buildings require excellence, and the students lined up in their uniforms pledge jointly and repeatedly their dedication to doing their best and honoring their family. The picture painted by the movie is that of a society that exerts tremendous psychological violence on its youth.

"Better Days" was Hong Kong's Oscar-nominated movie for best international feature film. It must be noted that it was released at a time of political tension between the former British territory and mainland China. According to the April issue of the magazine "Variety," many members of the Hong Kong public believe that "Better Days" does not represent them. In order for the movie to be released in China in November 2019, it had to be approved by the country's censure, edits were required to cut some of the movie's violence and to add uplifting propaganda content at the beginning and end praising the Chinese government's response to the issues raised.

"Better Days" is brought to Lamorinda by the local nonprofit International Film Showcase and will be opening at the Orinda Theatre on Sept. 17 for at least one full week, with three screenings each day. Seating is limited, tickets can be purchased in advance at www.OrindaMovies.com

Another Lamorinda cinematic experience, from your sofa

By Sophie Braccini

Lamorinda-based Generation Green along with Sustainable Contra Costa, 350 Contra Costa, and Sustainable Rossmoor started last June a new environmental education project called the Green Sofa Cinema Series.

The groups gather to choose a movie of interest accessible online for free and invite a speaker that will knowledgeably discuss the movie with the viewers who have already seen it, and join the online

conversation. The July movie was a short, powerful documentary "Disobedience." According the Lynda Deschambault, who founded Generation Green, the film tells the story of regular people around the world risking their lives to fight for a livable climate. The film is available for free on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNSrjpWyOi8&t=2s>

Then on Sept. 15 at 7 p.m. two local youth leaders, ages 13 and 14, who recently interacted with Sen. Dianne Feinstein to foster a green agenda, will discuss the topic of civil disobedience with the viewers on Zoom. Registration for the Zoom session is at <https://bit.ly/3sSPhua>. Dean Mayer, who founded Sustainable Moraga in 2004, recommends to have children Zoom in for it, too. "You'll hear from some amazing teens who are in the streets calling for we adults to get with it now and take major action to create a livable planet for the future. Who knows, you and your kids just might get inspired to join them," he added.

"We add more viewers each time," Deschambault said, adding that the next movie in October will be "Vertical Farming" <https://youtu.be/awZ3bSn5LRA>. The discussion with the participation of Sustainable Walnut Creek will be on Oct. 27. The speaker that evening will be Cindy Gershen; Sunrise Bistro, food and health advocate who is currently in a collaboration with UCSF and the University of Alabama to work on a CDC grant for food and system changes in K-12. She is a Sustainable Contra Costa Award winner, a well-known community social activist, a chef and a restaurant owner - but most especially an educator with experience teaching students the nuances of gardening in dirt versus hydroponically in tower gardens.

Past topics have included Plastic Pollution, Coping with Drought, and the Drawdown principles in "Ice on Fire." Green Sofa Cinema Series is online on Facebook.



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