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'Zucchini' is a poignant, real family film

By Sophie Braccini

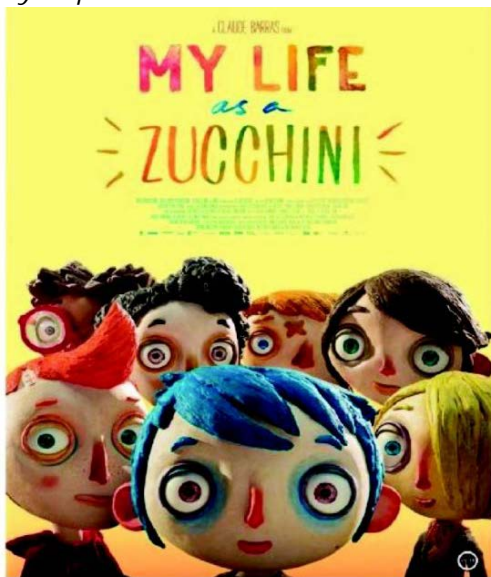


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This month the International Film Showcase offers a Swiss-French film, "My Life as A Zucchini, directed by Claude Barras. It's a beautiful animated movie that engaged the work of over 100 artists. This movie is a delicate and charming tale of resilience, hope and love appropriate for children from 6 years of age and for the adults who have been able to preserve their child's heart.

Zucchini is his name. He really clings to this nickname that was given to him by a mother who was not always kind, because she liked beer a bit too much. But now she's gone, "to heaven," and the little boy with eyes so immense that they take up most of his face, is so desperately alone. The father is long gone, "he liked 'hens' too much" (hen or poule means loose woman in French). A policeman takes him to a small orphanage. This is not a place where kids are abused in anyway. Quite the opposite. There he will recover, he will reinvent himself, he will learn to trust, to love again, and discover that the people whom you chose and that chose you can share stronger bonds than some families.

Zucchini's reality and that of his friends is grim. They have all ended in the children's home because of personal dramas that the movie does not hide. But it is an animation, so it says sad things with a light poetic touch and never falls into the grim or the frightening. The relationships between the children are shown with humor and tenderness. It shows that life has been tough for them, but they are resilient and they find strength in being a group. It is very rare to see a movie that is so touching and so real, without sugarcoating, yet completely adequate for young viewers.

"My Life as a Zucchini" was nominated for Best Animated Feature Film at the 2017 Oscars, but lost to "Zootopia." The Swiss-French film is definitely not Disney. It takes children much closer to reality than most American directors would dare. One could argue though that for that reason it also touches more authentic and real emotions. Parents can be re-assured that the movie ends well. The movie is now rated a very rare 100 percent positive critic consensus on Rotten Tomatoes.

The film was presented at the Cannes Film Festival last May and Barras gave an interview to the French magazine Telerama about the making of the movie. He explained that it all started 10 years ago for him when he read Gilles Paris' novel "Autobiography of a zucchini." He started drawing the characters, created many different versions, cutting them out and creating groups until he found the winning team of visual characters.

The entire film was made using the technique of "stop motion" where clay puppets are animated one image at a time. The puppets were created with a metal frame, clay for the face and bodies and a multitude of "accessories" such as mouths and limbs that are changed in a darkroom by puppeteers one frame at a time. Barras explained that the puppets are 35 centimeters high (13.8 inches) and are now in museums.

Barras casted the children's voices using non-actor children and had them play the scenario as if for a live performance. From these filmed interactions Barras constructed the final story played by the puppets. The result is stunning and aesthetically very pleasing.

"My Life as a Zucchini" opens on March 24 at the Orinda Theater for a week. More information is available at www.lamorindatheatres.com.

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