

The Kindergarten Teacher (12A)

Directed by Sara Colangelo



'18 USA 1hr 37mins

Fri 8 March for at least one week

Maggie Gyllenhaal gives the performance of her career as Lisa, a bored kindergarten teacher who becomes fascinated by a five-year-old's budding poetic genius, but her determination to nurture it sets her on a dangerous - and desperate - path.

Lisa is fed up with her career, her oblivious husband, and teenage kids. When she discovers a young child in her class may be a poetic prodigy (not to mention a ticket out of her mundane life), she is convinced his is a once-in-a-generation talent, and becomes obsessed to do whatever it takes to help it grow - even if it destroys her life...

Unnerving, beautiful, poetic and disturbing all at once, this is a daring look at how we value art in society.

This interview by Stephen Saito featuring an interview with director Sara Colangelo originally appeared on movaeablefest.com in Oct 2018.

Stephen Saito: How did this come about?

Sara Colangelo: I definitely didn't plan on having my second movie be an adaptation of another work, but I was pitched the project and when I saw Nadav Lapid's original film, I really fell in love with the story and when you're taking on something like a remake or an adaptation as a writer/director, it was important that I could reinvent it in some way and really provide something wildly new. In this case, Nadav did a beautiful job of weaving between the point of view of the teacher and the student, but I really wanted to anchor it in the female point of view [through the] Kindergarten teacher and really tell her story.

There's also a whole genre of child prodigy films and I didn't want to make this that. They're wonderful, but to me, this was Lisa's story and it's a psychological thriller set in this woman's mind, about somebody who wants to so desperately wants to be in touch with the artistic world and with creating art, but she feels that she can't do it through her own efforts and her own abilities, so she works through this child. That's really the story I wanted to tell and when Maggie came on, I knew I had a partner that I could work on this character with and delve in deeply.

Stephen Saito: Did she immediately come to mind for the role?

Sara Colangelo: The character is so intense and Maggie just does such a beautiful job of being, on the one hand, incredibly relatable – you [always] have so much empathy for her characters – and on the other hand, she takes risks. She's not afraid of being bizarre and going into territory that can feel new and exciting to audiences and Maggie

encapsulates that female character who is so intense and passionate.

We also both really love poetry and we worked together to shape the poetry that's in the film. One thing that she really brought to the project was that she said, "You know what? Maybe Lisa's poetry is really good. Maybe it's really going to be unclear in terms of who is the artist here. Is it the child or is she a really valid, wonderful artist too and she's just being discouraged and misunderstood as a person?" That idea and her fighting for that was really wonderful because there are so many complicated questions in the film about authorship and who is the artist, who gets to lavish praise onto who and the subjectivity of art in general. So pushing Lisa [towards] making her a character in which you're not sure if her art is brilliant [or not] makes the film a little bit more alive and engaging.

Stephen Saito: Did you have a lot of the poetry in mind before writing the rest of the script or did it organically come in during the writing process?

Sara Colangelo: The first poem, the "Anna" poem, is [a bit of] an adaptation of Nadav's poem in the original that I thought was nice and [could serve as] an ode to him in a way. Then I really loved this poet Ocean Vuong, [whose work] I read in the New Yorker, and Maggie and I were talking one day and I was like, "You have to read this guy Ocean," and she had a contact at the New Yorker. She had also loved this other poet Kaveh Akbar, so we worked with [the two of] them and then [also] with a fabulous woman named Dominique Townsend. Dominique wrote all of Lisa's poetry and then we used a mix of Ocean and Kaveh's work for Jimmy's. Weirdly enough, I also posted something on Facebook, [asking] if anybody's kids write poetry, and I got this amazing response from a friend of a friend who has a five-year-old daughter. She wrote what I thought was an unbelievable poem, which is the poem that [Jimmy's caretaker, played by Rosa Salazar] transcribes to [Lisa] on the telephone, so we were working with essentially four poets and trying to keep it all feeling like it was coming from Jimmy, so we worked with the poets in trying to carve that out.

Stephen Saito: What sold you on the Parker Sevak, the young boy who plays Jimmy?

Sara Colangelo: He was the youngest of the actors that we saw and he had an incredible dynamic with Maggie. We would do exercises together and he was just so open and he was at an age where he wasn't listening to directions too literally or too closely, like a six or seven-year-old might do. He was still in this space of being really intuitive and he was able to go on and off-script so beautifully in these little workshops that we did. He was just in awe of Maggie as a teacher, too and he would really listen to her, which I thought was

really beautiful. They just had a connection that was hard to describe in words.

Stephen Saito: Is it true you would just let Maggie essentially run the classroom and see what happened during those scenes at the school?

Sara Colangelo: Yeah, it was really because we were trying to figure out how do we make this feel like a real classroom and elicit good performances from these kids and not make them feel so self-conscious like the camera's there. Essentially, Pepe [Avila del Pino, our cinematographer] would step back in a corner of the room and I would be directing, but back on monitor, so I would really let Maggie be the teacher. And it's amazing how if you sit there for half-an-hour and you give the kids an activity, they forget that you're making a movie. So we have some really natural moments with these kids where they're trying to please her or they're asking [Maggie] questions and they really call her "Mrs. Spinelli" and forgot she was an actress.

Stephen Saito: I always think about tone in regard to getting a certain quality out of the performances or later in post-production augmenting what you got on set, but I understand you really tried to achieve it through the camerawork. What was it like figuring out using the camera to portray emotional distance?

Sara Colangelo: It was funny because we knew we were leaning into the thriller genre and wanting to employ some of those techniques, but at the same time, we didn't want the stylization of the film to take over. We wanted to keep it rooted in the psychological story of [Lisa] and have the camerawork service that story, so I think there are moments when you maybe as an audience are distant from Lisa, like "What is she doing here?" and you want to actually step back. And there was a lot of discussion between Pepe and I about when are we right there with her versus when is it just still and we're watching her, almost as a voyeur, and kind of in awe of the boundary that she's crossing? When is the camera allowed to be off sticks and we're walking and it's jiggly and it's tense? That's what's interesting hopefully about the film is that there's not one clear moral stance, where at times, you [think] "Oh yeah, I totally get her" and other times, "Oooh, this is feeling really uncomfortable." And we tried to illustrate those feelings with the cameras.

It was also my very first instinct when I wrote the script was [to have the score be] classical music that's maybe unraveling and dissonant. We wanted something that could touch on the childish and the innocence of moments, but then unravel into something very uncomfortable and confusing to the ear at moments where you're just trying to figure out what's happening on screen and that's making you feel kind of askew.

Stephen Saito: Was there anything that came as a surprise that's now in the film that you really like about it?

Sara Colangelo: Towards the end of the shoot, there's this beautiful moment where Maggie's holding a plate of vegetable snacks and the camera tilts up and I was in the editing room watching this and I thought, "Oh, that's so funny. There's so much here that reminded

me of a woman being a constant caretaker of others and never really able to create her own art. Here she is discouraged and told she's not an artist and she's just trying everything she can to be in it somehow, to be close to art, but having to do it vicariously through a child. And the beautiful thing about it, but this feeling I didn't anticipate, [was that] Lisa is caring for people and always considering others, but [she starts to ask] is she feeding herself ever? And this is a moment in her life where she decides, "Okay, I want to." It was a little bit in the script early on, but there was something that Maggie gave it that was just palpable to me in some of these Kindergarten scenes that broke my heart in a way that I didn't anticipate.

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