

The Intouchables

Written and directed by Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano, 2011,
Quad Productions (Clichy, 112 minutes, French, rated R)

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The Intouchables tells the story of Philippe and Driss, two men who need each other, yet initially repel each other like oil and water. Philippe, a quadriplegic aristocrat with a fancy for high-speed cars (and planes), is someone health care teams like to term “the difficult patient” (an understatement). He burns through caretakers like tissue paper set alight. Some are fired within minutes of crossing the threshold of his home. Yet, this is a man whose disabilities require round-the-clock care without exception. Viewers watch the cycle of hiring and firing like a revolving door at the foot of Philippe’s Paris mansion.

Enter Driss, a young ex-con who finds the concept of “work” extremely unpalatable and searches for any way to fool the French social services system in allowing him to collect unemployment benefits. Although Driss clings to the hope that Philippe will reject his caretaker application, Philippe turns the tables, seeming to love the idea of a challenge and thus brings Driss into his fold—his empire of high-life living, fine art, and fast cars. (While Driss, like most people, readily takes to the “high-life living” and “fast cars” with little difficulty, the “fine art” proves to be a problem early on. By the end of



François Cluzet (left) stars alongside Omar Sy in the film, *The Intouchables*, based on the true story of a paralysed man and his unruly caretaker

the movie, however, Driss makes amends—in a way one should witness by seeing the film and not reading this review—and himself dabbles with oils and canvas.)

Can a young, black, ex-con safely take care of a wealthy aristocrat? Is he so “damaged” and “morally corrupt” that he cannot be trusted with a rich invalid? Will he bring his personal baggage to the (seemingly) pristine life of Philippe? Philippe’s friends raise such concerns as well as their eyebrows. *The Intouchables* deals with all of these questions and anxieties and more.

Certainly young black men with criminal records don’t have an easy time in life, no matter what country they call home. This is one of the reasons why this film, set in the always-assumed-to-be enchanting Paris, is likely to resonate with residents of supposedly less-

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glamorous places like Detroit and New Orleans. So what is society to do with this often forgotten, devalued, and stigmatized cohort? Are we to just accept a pessimistic view that they are destined for self-destruction, or could we be like Philippe, a vulnerable man who is “ripe for the picking” yet uses his own disability to rehabilitate another human being?

In addition to the gripping and socially imperative storyline, the film soundtrack is wonderfully moving, a blend of classical (thanks to Philippe) and disco (thanks to Driss). In fact, as I write this review, I am listening to “Fly” by Ludovico Einaudi that is featured in the film. This is a powerful piece that brings back images of Driss and Philippe during a bonding episode—paragliding in the Alps. And another image—Driss taking Philippe for a joy ride in Philippe’s formerly stowed Maserati. Why let it sit, Driss convinces Philippe, and merely gather dust? (A metaphor, too, for both Philippe’s and Driss’ own life situations.) The Maserati is made for racing, but

can it outrun the French police? (You’ll have to watch the film to find out!) In this way, both men’s lives entwine and blur, with Driss enjoying comforts of the world he has never known and a different kind of relationship with the authorities and Philippe being chased by the police as a law-breaker.

Two downsides of the movie are the numerous images of smoking (certainly common in France) as well as occasional illicit drug use (cautiously speculative as medicinal for the patient). The film makes a significant contribution to the medical humanities and would make an excellent selection for medical students and other clinical trainees pursuing reflective writing.

Disclosure I am an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, but was not involved with the review of this article.