



# KinoFest

## THE GERMAN FILM FESTIVAL



## FILM REVIEW: The Teachers' Lounge

*By Princess Kinoc of Film Police Reviews*

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There's a metaphor for teachers that says, "Teachers are the sculptors of tomorrow's future." And this is perhaps the metaphor on Ms. Nowak's mind when she landed the seventh-grade class in a small rural city in Germany. Unquestionably idealistic, she aims to lead and show her students that as a sculptor of tomorrow's future, she must make difficult choices to teach them what is right and what is wrong.

To say that *Das Lehrerzimmer* (The Teacher's Lounge) is an easy watch would be a big mistake. From the first few minutes of the film, there are no loud and overly enthusiastic colors that would remind you of a happy time in school, but instead, Judith Kaufman's cinematography boasts an overwhelming gloom. The film follows Carla Nowak (Leonie Benesch), who finds herself and her students in the middle of a school scandal. Being the new teacher in school, she becomes an easy target for the other teachers to pressure into looking further into which of her students might be the culprit. This pressure from her peers, along with an increasing doubt of integrity amongst her students, creates an increasing moral crisis within Ms. Nowak.

She notices a fellow teacher stealing coins from the coffee counter in the teacher's lounge, but she has no proof. The said teacher smiles back at her as if nothing happened. This prompts her to act when she starts recording via her laptop at her seat in the teachers' lounge. She does not capture the same person, but rather someone else who unfortunately is related to one of her students.

This framing device, in which the video does not show if the person had stolen her wallet or if this person truly is Ms. Kuhn, except for the resemblance of the starry shirt she is wearing, offers a perfect example of how we are quick to make remarks about one another. Conflicted with her ideals and the school system, Ms. Nowak makes the preemptive judgment to report Ms. Kuhn, despite knowing that this will deeply hurt Oskar.

The way that the camera never leaves Nowak's sight, almost always leaves us in turning angles representing the increased anxiety she must be feeling and how her moral dilemma seeps onto the screen. We never see her life outside the campus, which also adds to that tension, that there is nothing else on her mind and so we should also make the assumptions that she is making. Despite the consequences of it.

Benesch understands the complexities of her character so well that you see her pained face from

start to finish. Ilker Çatak and Johannes Duncker's riveting script creates complex characters not only for Nowak but also for the students who seem to share the anxiety-riddled emotions that their teacher faces, and the way the young actors are able to comprehend these is just brilliant. It's amazing how Benesch manages to bounce from feeling sure of her accusation but then remembers that as Oskar's teacher, she must teach him that there are two sides to the story, although she has diminished this opportunity from Mrs. Kuhn.

Çatak's direction not only utilizes the isolated frames of Ms. Nowak's view but also the prospect that these students learn that opportunities start this way, by using student journalism to pin the scandal against her. Never mind the truth, the truth can be bent depending on who is telling it. It's as if the film tells us that children learn from us in so many ways, even in the lowest forms if it feels like an acceptable form of truth.

The other interesting view shown here is that of Oskar, played by Leonard Stettnisch, who plays the central child character and navigates his feelings between his trust in his mother and his teacher. There is also the aspect of him trying to defend his mother because he feels that the accusations against her are misplaced and are perhaps mostly due to their socioeconomic status and ethnic background. And yet, he feels that Ms. Nowak respects his ideas and encourages him to learn, which adds to his inner turmoil around the whole situation.

Das Lehrerzimmer is a slow-paced character study that might be difficult to watch at times. Çatak makes bold choices in his direction, utilizing different angles to portray the tension between the teacher, her students, their parents, and us, the outsiders that make up the added judgment. The film reminds me of the way Arden Rod Condez built the same doubt and tension amongst peers in his 2019 film *John Denver Trending*, which also takes place between a scandal a student faces on the internet, that's gone viral, and the way his mother tries her best to protect him. Çatak might have used too much time to build up that tension, but he succeeds when in the climactic scene we see Oskar break - and Ms. Nowak tries her best to redeem herself and her judgment. But, the way that the school system has not been built for them, we can only hope and pray for a better resolution. That is not the case in this film, but it is commendable how he manages to free us from that tension towards the closing scene, albeit only for a short while.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Princess Kinoc](#) is a freelance writer, and the current Editor-in-Chief for [Film Police](#) Reviews. She is also a member of the Society of Filipino Film Reviewers (SFFR) and the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SoFIA). Outside FPR, she has also written reviews and essays for *New Durian Cinema* and *Pelikula Journal*, and she co-hosts the Filipino film podcast, *Third World Cinema Club*. She is a black coffee drinker, and she's not so sure if that matters.