

Half Nelson: the parts are greater than the whole

By Ramón Valle
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Half Nelson, written and directed by Ryan Fleck

As the end credits of *Half Nelson* roll, one feels uncomfortable, certainly disappointed and angry. Why couldn't this film have been better? Why couldn't it fulfill the promise of its beginning? One regrets opportunities missed and wasted talent. How could it possibly fail to deliver, both politically and on a human scale, when many of its moments ring so true and honest, when the performances of its two leading actors are so finely nuanced and realized?

For *Half Nelson*, despite being about an inspirational inner-city junior high school teacher who infuses his students with a love for learning, eschews the false "big" statement. It may contain incendiary material and themes, but it avoids all histrionics and refuses to wallow in cheap melodrama or false sentiment. Most important, it avoids mightily the conventions of the genre. It is neither a "come-from-behind-triumph-over-adversity" story, nor a phony "victory-of-poor-students-over-a-soulless-school-bureaucracy" melodrama.

For one, its main character, Dan Dunne (Ryan Gosling), is a supremely likable, charismatic young history teacher at an inner-city school in Brooklyn, New York. At the beginning of the film, we see him conducting a history lesson. It immediately strikes us how charming, winning, and talented he is—and how much his students admire and respect him. We immediately notice how different he is.

How many teachers impart to their students, with a sense of humor, an understanding of history as a conflict of opposing social forces? His students not only enjoy the class; they listen and participate enthusiastically. They love and respect him. And most important, they love learning. So, from the very

beginning, *Half Nelson* pulls the carpet from under audience's feet: these inner-city kids care.

Director Ryan Fleck has done a terrific job in pulling back and refusing to overdo what could have easily become overwrought material. Instead, he lets us observe quietly. He allows the reality of the characters' lives and relationships to emerge slowly, to seep quietly into our consciousness so as to better involve us in their own moment-to-moment discoveries.

Nor does the film engage in the typical gross, sophomoric vulgar antics typical of "independent" film characters whose only goal in life seems to be the gratification of their libidos. If anything, *Half Nelson* is a little too earnest, perhaps a tad too somber and lacking in humor.

Later, a female teacher Dunne sleeps with finds a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* in his apartment—well, let us just say our teacher is at least acquainted with certain Marxist concepts. Another teacher wonders if he's a "communist." One never comes to understand his politics clearly, but it is obvious his sympathies, if vague, are with the left.

Everybody likes Dunne. Ryan Gosling's performance, despite the one glaring flaw in the screenplay (more about this later), is so rich in its details and perceptiveness that the audience watching the film must feel toward him the same way the characters in the film do. But we soon discover a terrible contradiction in his character: this handsome, attractive teacher is secretly addicted to crack cocaine. His descent into hell has begun even before the film does.

The theme of inner conflict runs throughout the film. As charming, charismatic, and terrific as he is as a teacher, we soon discover a terrible contradiction in his character that makes him his own worst nightmare: he

is a crack addict, has no friends, and is unable to maintain any relationship with women. Once again, this twist takes the audience by surprise.

He doubles as the girls' basketball coach at his school, thus providing a physical antidote or complement to his intellectual pursuits. One day, after snorting coke, he passes out in one of the stalls of the gym's bathroom. Thirteen-year-old Drey (Shareeka Epps), a player on the team as well as one of his history students, finds him. In need of a father figure, she doesn't judge him. They begin a strange, at times surprising, often exasperating, and ultimately meaningful relationship through which they find some sort of redemption.

These human opposites become dependent on each other; they continually clash, learn from and transform each other. But they do so in many fresh ways; their story avoids the usual clichés that generally accompany such stories. The question remains, however: to what end? After much is said and done, what do they discover? What, if anything, in the end, does their discovery about one another have to do with the great social upheavals that the film alludes to? The film doesn't even bother to be ambiguous about answering this question. It never does at all.

This is a serious difficulty, given that throughout its running time the action stops cold to allow individual students to address the camera directly and give straightforward accounts of some of the great class battles of the past 40 years: the Attica revolt, the crushing of the Chilean workers in 1973, the Civil Rights movement.

Oddly enough, Dan barely mentions the war in Iraq, to which he and the filmmakers are obviously opposed. Why does this contemporary event receive so little attention? This gives the film a somewhat abstract and falsely "timeless" air; it produces a certain distancing that confuses the viewer as to whether the film takes place in the here and now or some decades ago. At any rate, these sequences are among the least effective in the film, as they have no apparent organic connection to the drama that unfolds before us.

The performances and the honesty and sincerity of *Half Nelson* lift it out of the ordinary. Gosling and newcomer Epps give accomplished performances: subtle, resonant, deep—among the best this year, but in the end this remains a peculiarly unresolved and

inconclusive film.

A deep flaw in the script makes *Half Nelson*, despite its many admirable qualities, so unsatisfying. To wit, why is this wonderfully sympathetic, handsome, intelligent teacher, obviously loved by students, fellow teachers, ex-girlfriend, and parents alike, hooked on drugs and ready to go over the edge? We never, *never*, find out the reason for his habit, why he wants to destroy himself.

Does it have anything to do with the accumulated impact of political events? Or the pressure of his inner-city teaching job? Or is it simply an arbitrary, personal failing without any obvious connection to external events or processes? At the end, we have no more insight into his life than we did at the beginning. We have very little idea of his past or how he became a junkie. Thus the film nearly collapses before our very eyes. If we don't know anything about the central character's life or what drives him, why should we care?

Were *Half Nelson* not anchored in its wonderful performances, its many heart-felt, honest moments and the sincerity of its approach, it would have virtually negated itself.

In this sense, the parts of *Half Nelson*—a hold in which a wrestler's arm is passed under the opponent's armpit and his hand is on the back of the opponent's head; presumably Dan feels himself locked in such a position—are much greater than the whole.

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