

Afterwords

The Symbolic Clash of *Whiplash*

Robert Begley
Independent Writer

From the opening drum beat one hears over a dark screen to another dark screen as its crashing, closing note, the movie *Whiplash* takes the audience on an intense journey they will not likely forget.¹ This film is, in a word, bold.

The theme of *Whiplash* is the single-tracked dedication to the pursuit of excellence. It is dramatized through two clashing characters. Terence Fletcher (J. K. Simmons, who deservedly won an Academy Award for his performance) is the respected, feared, foul-mouthed, face-slapping instructor at New York's Shaffer Conservatory of Music, the best music school in the country. He is intolerant of any form of mediocrity and bluntly says so. He despises the fact that his beloved jazz is dying in the musical swamp of "Starbucks jazz albums."

Andrew Neiman (Miles Teller), a freshman at the school, is the talented yet somewhat insecure drummer who aspires to be "one of the greats." But he doesn't just fantasize about it. He practices repeatedly, to the point of (often bloody) physical and mental exhaustion. His conflict is heightened by his single-parent father (Paul Reiser) who loves his son but admits that he does not understand his passionate devotion to his craft.

Whenever Fletcher enters a room at the school, he bursts into it like a force of nature, and all of the musicians snap to attention. The camera follows his black shoes in motion, up through the rest of his stylish black outfit. Then, while demanding perfection, he proceeds to cut down some of the best music students in the world. He also tells them to have fun.

Meanwhile, Neiman contends with those same musicians' hostility and envy toward his ability and demeanor. He tells his soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend (Melissa Benoist), "I don't think they like me too much. But I don't care too much." Though Fletcher sees both exceptional skill and drive in Neiman, the film hinges on the teacher throwing down the challenge, "If you want the part, earn it!" Neiman gives unswerving effort, overcoming one obstacle after another—first outperforming his competitors in the band, then losing his seat, only to be given a chance to redeem himself.

¹ *Whiplash*, directed by Damien Chazelle (Bold Films, 2014).

As much as *Whiplash* is about the pursuit of excellence, the value of the film is that it demonstrates the role that hero worship can play in that quest.

We see Neiman's admiration for his hero, Buddy Rich, as he constantly stares at posters, reads quotes, listens to CDs, and watches video clips of the master. This inspires Neiman to think and work harder, faster, and smarter. When he is not drumming, he is reading drum charts or thinking about drumming, in order to earn the part.

A high point of the movie is a contentious dinner scene, pitting Neiman against his relatives, when he describes his idea of success as being like Charlie Parker, "the greatest musician of the twentieth century."

Fletcher's hero worship of "the yardbird" Parker is also evident. He repeats the (historically inaccurate, though dramatically told) story of how the young Parker's saxophone playing got him laughed off the stage, only to return a year later determined "to play the best solo the world has ever heard."

Fletcher knows that his tactics of fear and intimidation have made him enemies, but he doesn't apologize. At one point he tells Neiman, "I was there to push people beyond what's expected of them. I believe that's an absolute necessity. Otherwise we're depriving the world of the next Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker."



The highest drama plays out in the scenes where Fletcher and Neiman face off, as the camera pans quickly from one to the other. Profanity-laced insults come from one end. Blood, guts, and the sheer willpower to hold on come from the other. During rehearsal of Hank Levy's upbeat jazz composition *Whiplash*, the battle continues, as chairs, cowbells, and drums are hurled and kicked from one side, and are countered from the other by even faster pounding of sticks on skins and cymbals. That symbolic clash (and

cymbalic crash) continues. While everyone else cringes in Fletcher's presence, Neiman takes him on, even bodily attacking him at one point, after he is simply pushed too far.

It is easy to consider the flaw in Fletcher's character (especially his use of force and graphic language) as a flaw in the film. Although he is manipulative, abusive, and dishonest, he is not portrayed as someone to be emulated. (For those who believe that Fletcher's drill sergeant tactics are reserved for soldiers or athletes but not performing artists, my ballet teacher was somewhat less verbally abusive, but I still saw dozens of dancers march out of class in tears.)

In a film where classic jazz music is so prevalent, composers Justin Hurwitz and Tim Simonec manage to create an original score that often has a big band feel. A six-note melody is used repeatedly, in both major and minor modes, which enhances the emotion of each scene in which it is used. One often gets the feeling of being at a live concert. (These are some of the reasons why I returned to the theater eight times, and have watched the DVD several more times.)

Writer-director Damien Chazelle's second feature film is highly stylized; each scene suspensefully flows into the next. This makes the conflict more dramatic than a documentary about a teacher-student relationship. In real life faster is not always better, but in *Whiplash* it is—until the very end. Let's hope the thirty-year-old Chazelle has more of the same film success in the future.

On a deeper level the clash in *Whiplash* addresses important questions such as: What are the requirements of human greatness? Must one always go it alone, with a grim determination that causes one to sweep aside everything else? Or is it possible to integrate other positive values, including healthy romantic relationships, in that mission?

Whatever the answers to the above questions are, what we do know is that in the final ten minutes of *Whiplash*, during the performance of Duke Ellington's *Caravan*, we see Neiman reach inside to become the type of independent, creative hero he admires, with a vision of his own as he evolves from potential to actual greatness. Lights out!

