

Not One Less (1999)

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Rated G. Running time: 1 hour 46 min.

Our Content Rating (1-10): Violence 1; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.

Luke 18:4-5

Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*) directs this charming tale about a substitute teacher barely older than some of her students who has the tenacity of a snapping turtle. When Teacher Gao has to go away for a month to care for his ailing mother, the village mayor secures a substitute, 13 year-old Wei Minzhu. Teacher Gao, when he first lays eyes on his substitute, almost cancels his trip, but he reluctantly leaves the youngster in charge, telling her that he will pay her a bonus if there is "not one less" student in the class when he returns. There has been a steady attrition of students over the past year, threatening the future of the impoverished school, because government aid is tied to enrollment.

Wei Minzhu has little skill, and certainly no experience, as a teacher, save one, and it is not so much a skill, as a character trait—tenacity. When a coach comes to recruit one of her girls who is a fast runner, Wei Minzhu not only refuses to grant permission for the girl's release, but she hides her in order to keep her. The mayor and the coach prevail, pointing

out that it is for the student's best interest.

Minzhu's nemesis is Zhay Huike, a boy who loves to stir up trouble in and out of class. Just when it seems she has him under control, he is sent by his sick mother to the city, where he is to work to supplement her meager income. Upset over this, Wei Minzhu is determined not to lose another pupil. She tells her class she must go and bring him back from the city. However, it is a long way, and she has no money. They try moving bricks at the local factory, the teacher turning the enterprise into a math lesson, with the students figuring how many hours it will take to earn her bus fare if they are paid so much per brick. The factory manager is upset that they break so many, and refuses to pay, especially as he did not ask for the class's help. He does not figure on the tenacity of Wei Minzhu, whose will is as hard as his bricks.

She does get to the city, though not by bus as she had planned. Her problems seem to be just beginning. How to find the boy in such a sea of humanity? Two methods fail, and then she follows the advice of someone who suggests that she advertise her search for the boy on TV. But the gatekeeper at the television studio will not let her in when she learns the girl has no money. Wei Minzhu pleads, cajoles, and even tries to sneak by, but the woman at the gate takes her duty seriously. So the teacher stands in front of the building and asks every man coming out if he is the manager. All day, and her efforts bear no fruit. Then the next day, until—you have to see it to appreciate the delightful, satisfying ending.

Like the widow who kept after the unjust judge in Jesus' parable, Wei Minzhu is one of the persistent little ones who finally prevail. An intriguing note about the film: Director Zhang Yimou uses no professional actors—the teachers were real teachers, and the station manager is a real TV manager, as is the man who portrays the mayor. A film not to be missed!