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SXSW Review: *A Teacher*

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on March 26, 2013 - 9:30am in [Local Indies](#) | [Reviews](#) | [SXSW](#)



The Austin-shot movie *A Teacher*, written/directed/produced by [Hannah Fidell](#), colors outside the lines with its portrayal of a high-school romance gone awry.

Maryland native Fidell's follow-up to *We're Glad You're Here* (2010) takes a decisively different look at adulthood and loss of innocence. While the two films have the same star ([Lindsay Burdge](#)), *A Teacher* raises questions about the role educators have on a student's life, the idea of maturity and what constitutes an "adult." Burdge plays Diana Watts, an AP English teacher at an Austin high school whose consensual relationship with one of her male students (former UT student [Will Brittain](#)) spirals out of control.

A Teacher opens with Diana preparing herself to step in front of the classroom stage by going through her morning routine of jogging and driving to work. She loses herself in the motions of normalcy, with her reusable mug and J. Crewesque clothes, but this thirtysomething is far from normal. Or is she?

The monotony of teaching has been a complaint I've heard from current and former teachers, who feel suffocated by the watchful eyes of administrators and parents. Diana's feelings are no different. Possessed by the "what could have beens" and haunted by family troubles, Diana reverts back to a childlike state through her romance with high-school senior Eric Tull, one whose future is bright and filled with what appears to be endless opportunities (judging by his family's home and vacation house in the Hill Country).

Fidell drops viewers into a strange gray area in Diana and Eric's relationship, a place that conjures up youthful memories that may or may not have actually occurred because they seem almost too fantastical. A backdrop of sterile school hallways and a politically correct classroom make Diana and Eric's relationship even more of a fantasy. The duo is in a stage of their relationship that allows them to comfortably flow from front desk to backseat, dry cleaning bill not included. With the chime of the school bell, Diana's authority is lost inside Eric, both literally and figuratively.

The viewer rarely sees them talk or exchange text messages that don't revolve around sex or the fear of getting caught. Uncomplicated, ego-boosting sex appears to be what's on Eric's mind, while Diana works to fill an emotional void. Nonetheless, the camera's meditative, albeit voyeuristic shots make the viewer feel uneasy: they don't really know who these people are and never will. This made me enjoy and not enjoy the movie. I wanted to find out more about Diana, why she became a teacher, how long she had been teaching, when would she visit her ailing mother?

But these are similar complaints I had with *The Piano Teacher* (2001), which I consider to be one of the most beautiful, disturbing French films I've ever seen. Alike in many ways, *A Teacher* is a more realistic account of a teacher-student relationship ... I hope. Both movies had great performances by its leading women.

Burdge's performance is like lightning in a bottle: subtle and unpredictable. There are instances where Diana alters her voice to sound younger when she's speaking with Eric. Outside of the classroom, Diana is the submissive, never speaking to Eric, but with him. She allows him to consume her little by little, and watches as he spits her out, making her emotional and physical breakdown all the more heartwrenching.

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Austin connections: *A Teacher* was shot in Austin with a primarily local cast and crew. Brittain is a University of Texas alum. Fans of Austin indies might recognize Jonny Mars and Chris Doubek.

If you missed *A Teacher* at SXSW, you can catch it again in early April at the Dallas International Film Festival. Oscilloscope Pictures has acquired theatrical/home video distribution rights for the film as well.

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