

# 'Greatness' in the classroom

One film and one educator can teach us all a lesson or two — and perhaps guide us — as we talk about reforming our education system

By Bruce Kluger

If I were secretary of Education, I'd get creative.

Instead of attempting to kick-start the president's underfunded, overwrought No Child Left Behind program, or sink more money into researching yet another standardized test, or latch onto the latest evangelical mission to target "homosexual" cartoons in educational TV, I'd simply log onto Amazon.com, order 3.5 million copies of the new documentary *A Touch of Greatness*, and send them to every teacher, principal and PTA president in United States.

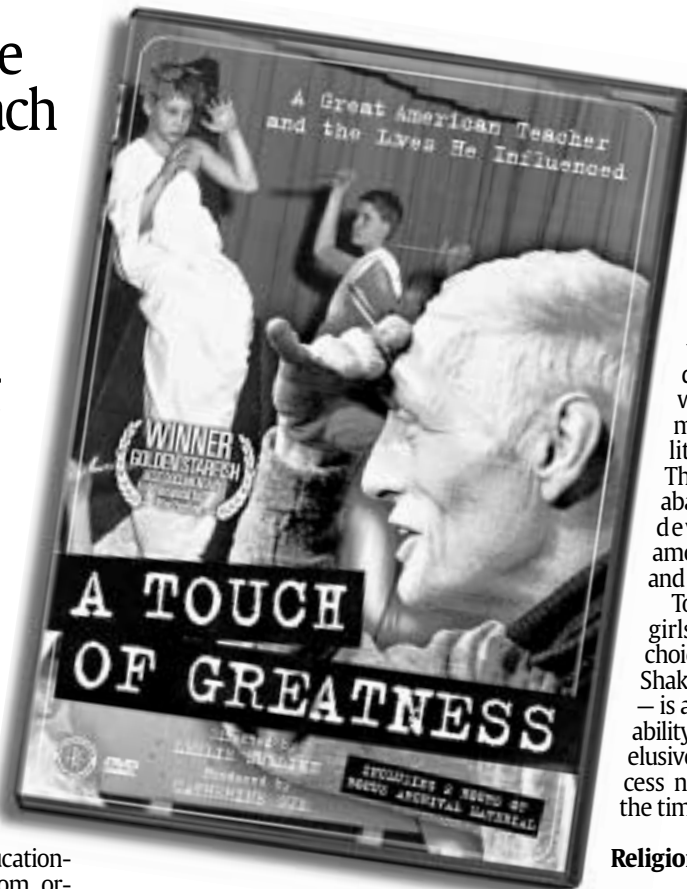
If that didn't do the trick, I don't know what would.

First broadcast in January on PBS' *Independent Lens* program — and available on video and DVD this month — *Greatness* chronicles the career of author-educator Albert Cullum, zooming in on his stint as an elementary school teacher in the leafy suburbs of New York City from 1956 through 1966.

## The possibilities of the young mind

Intercutting archival footage from his teaching days with glowing testimonials from his now-grown charges, *Greatness* paints a vivid portrait of the magic that transpires when kids are lucky enough to land a teacher who understands the limitness of the young mind.

Engaged, enthusiastic and wickedly creative, Cullum learned early on in his career that "if I'm not having fun in class, no one is having fun." As a result, his students were treated to a decidedly unconventional approach to academia, routinely engaging in such imaginative activities as swimming up a giant paper facsimile of the Mississippi River; re-enacting the Lincoln assassination and the Cuban missile crisis; operating on "bleeding" nouns in a "grammar hospital"; and, most impressively, reading and performing a raft of classic literature — from



the Greeks to Shakespeare — in off-site settings as exotic as an actual forest.

"Children understand the heroic aspect of Shakespeare's characters," Cullum explains in the film, "the feathered cap and the wooden sword that we as adults have lost."

More than just a fly-on-the-classroom-wall peek at an exceptional educator, however, *Greatness* serves as a cautionary tale about our nation's current education system, and the way in which policymakers' ongoing efforts to tinker with the process may be, at best, heavy-handed or, at worst, wrongheaded.

For instance, in the past year, the debate over social promotion reached high decibels in school districts across the nation, most notably in New York, where Mayor Michael Bloomberg instituted rigid policies to hold back third-graders who aren't keeping up with their classmates. But it wasn't until I watched *Greatness* that I truly understood how counterproductive such a policy can be. After all, classrooms are simply microcosms of families, and no family I know of jettisons its lesser members.

"I see (the classroom) as a wagon," Cullum explains early on in the film. "Your thoroughbreds of the class are going to pull the wagon — they're the leaders. But everyone is on that wagon, and everyone reaches the goal. No one is left out."

Granted, Cullum called roll in his classroom more than a generation before

slashed budgets, plummeting scores and hallway metal detectors would become the stuff of modern education. But building a child's mind is inarguably as daunting a task as building a new system, and in this regard, Cullum made the grade.

The film also offers a decent argument about the potential myopia of modern-day standardized testing, which customarily cleaves to math and grammar as the true litmus of our kids' smarts. Though Cullum certainly didn't abandon these areas of study, he devoted an extraordinary amount of energy to the arts — and it paid off.

To witness Mr. C's boys and girls articulately defend their choice of history's "best writer" — Shakespeare, Sophocles or Shaw — is a reminder of kids' impressive ability to grasp the intangible and elusive, and how the path to success needn't always wind through the times-tables.

## Religion's influence in learning

Curiously, I couldn't help but notice how little an impact religion had on Cullum's curriculum, a concept that seems refreshingly quaint in today's socially charged climate. Despite a recent Zogby poll in which 80% of those interviewed said they believe religion should not dictate what goes on in school, just the opposite is gaining steam in today's classrooms, as textbooks, classic literature and long-held scientific theories are suddenly under siege by an army of hand-wringing advocacy groups.

Conversely, when it came to personal beliefs, Cullum seemed more devoted to "giving each child the gift of believing in him or herself" — whether by challenging them to collect hundreds of new vocabulary words over the course of the year, or casting them in theatrical roles that promised a kind of field-trip to the unknown.

Indeed, the only allusion to religion in *Greatness* is a comment from Cullum himself — who died at the age of 80, shortly after the film was completed — as he discusses one student's performance in a class production of *Joan of Arc*.

"Every public schoolgirl should have the chance to play the part of Saint Joan before the age of 12," he explains with a smile. "Because the older you get, the more difficult it is to hear the voices of Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine calling you."

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