

'The Most Beautiful Country in the World': Film Review

7:09 PM PST 11/20/2018 by Neil Young



Courtesy of SixPackFilm

THE BOTTOM LINE

A refreshingly low-key addition to the burgeoning ranks of migrants-in-Europe movies. [🐦](#)

Newcomer Bagher Ahmadi stars in the latest docu-fiction hybrid by prolific Serbian writer-director Zelimir Zilnik.

A tenderly sympathetic and maturely measured peek into the daily lives of Mideast refugees seeking a new home in western Europe, *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* (*Das schönste land der welt*) is the latest in a long line of socially committed docu-fiction hybrids from veteran Serbian writer-director Zelimir Zilnik.

Taking a refreshingly low-key approach to hot-button subject matter, Zilnik — surely ex-Yugoslavia's closest equivalent to Ken Loach — elicits winning performances from his non-pro cast in this Austria-Serbia-Slovenia-Croatia co-production mainly set and shot in Vienna. Warmly received on its world premiere at DocLisboa, it should pay its way around the festival circuit in the coming months.

The fact that February 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of Zilnik winning the Golden Bear at the Berlinale at age 26 — for his aptly titled debut feature *Early Works* — won't do this latest offering, something like his 27th feature-length work in total, any harm at all. In the last couple of years alone, Zilnik has received major retrospectives from Sao Paulo to St Petersburg, including at DocLisboa in 2015 and Manhattan's Anthology Film Archives in 2017, cementing his status as one of the most respected and important auteurs from central/eastern Europe.

The Most Beautiful Country in the World flows organically from his previous picture, 2015's *Logbook Serbistan*, which followed the fortunes of traumatized migrants from war-torn and economically ravaged areas in North Africa and the Mideast, resident in Serbian asylum facilities. Here, the focus is on those fortunate ones who have made the next step into the European Union, and are gradually adjusting to life in the well-heeled Austrian capital, Vienna.

Front and center is the personable figure of Bagher — screen newcomer Bagher Ahmadi in effect playing himself. A 23-year-old from Afghanistan, he arrived in Austria after a hazardous journey through Iran, Turkey, Greece and the Balkans in 2015 and quickly learned German. Resourceful and upbeat, he also rapidly makes friends among Vienna's multi-cultural population and listens to their individual stories of oppression, repression and escape.

Zilnik deploys Ahmadi as a happy-go-lucky prism through which the social realities faces by those in his position can be addressed and understood. Such plot as there is revolves around Bagher's grandfather, Haydar (scenestealer Habib Tawhidi), who enters Austria illegally via Slovenia and is much less able to adapt to his new environment. "Are these mining tunnels?" asks Haydar when Bagher takes him on Vienna's underground system, the U-bahn.

Haydar is a traditionalist, extremely keen that his grandson should marry a suitable female as soon as possible; Bagher is perfectly content with his girlfriend, and concocts a droll subterfuge designed to keep both his kin and his beloved happy. This provides the film with a welcome helping of humor, setting up the audience nicely for a jarring, bittersweet finale.

These last moments are easily the most dramatic in a film which is very careful to avoid sensationalism or histrionics, instead taking the brave, audacious route of showing the more mundane but relatable aspects of the characters' quotidian existences. There are, however, flashes of anger here, with Zilnik pointing the finger at those who have economically exploited places like Afghanistan (the "beautiful country" of the title) and left them to be ravaged by tribal warfare.

There's surprisingly little about political happenings in Austria during the febrile 2016-17 period in which the film takes place, but presumably this is a reflection of how Bagher and company are primarily concerned with their own problems and opportunities rather than becoming engaged with developments on a national level.

Functionally shot in widescreen by cinematographer Peter Roehsler, its multiple strands intercut by editor Vuk Vukmirovic, *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* adheres to Zilnik's usual unfussy, unvarnished approach. And as usual, the dividends yielded may appear rather modest, but on closer inspection are hard-won, precious and persuasive. Zilnik's is a small, still, reasonable voice of crucial importance in the current climate of noisy disinformation and reductively corrosive rhetoric.

Production companies: Nanook Film (in collaboration with RTV Vojvodina, Tramal Films, Factum Documentary Film Project)

Cast: Bagher Ahmadi, Basima Saad Abed Wade, Ivana Nikolic, Habib Tawhidi, Negin Rezaie

Director-screenwriter: Zelimir Zilnik

Producers: Zelimir Zilnik, Miha Cernec, Vanja Kranjac, Nenad Puhovski

Cinematographer: Peter Roehsler

Editor: Vuk Vukmirovic

Sound: Gunther Tuppinger

Venue: DocLisboa

Sales: sixpackfilm, Vienna

In Pashto, German, English

102 minutes



NEIL YOUNG

✉ THRnews@thr.com

🐦 [BohemiaStable](#)

