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**TIFF 2019: ‘Nobadi’ Turns the Oddball Couple Genre on Its Head**

An Austrian pensioner and Afghani meet in the lacerating Nobadi, a sly deconstruction of the oddball couple genre.

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A grouchy Austrian pensioner and an earnest Afghani migrant fatefully meet in *Nobadi,* a subversive take on the empathy-can-defeat-prejudice genre that abounds in gleeful misdirection. A compassionate yet lacerating look at relations between white Europeans and Muslim migrants in Austria, *Nobadi* draws a sharp line between past and present that brutally exposes the darkness within all men.

Robert (Heinz Trixner) wakes up one day to find his dog has died. After verbally abusing his vet on the phone — who he accuses of poisoning his dog with the vitamins they gave him — he begins to dig a hole in the garden of his allotment. When his pick axe breaks, he travels to the store to buy a replacement. On the way home, he meets Adbid (Hassan Zadeh), a paperless migrant from Afghanistan who offers to help him finish digging.

Robert is a harsh taskmaster, paying only three euros an hour and constantly berating the young man for his lack of discipline and experience. Yet when the young man injures himself, a simple work-for-hire job turns into something much more gripping. The final result is a study in conflicting and changing sympathies, constantly challenging the audience’s expectations by cleverly dancing around stereotypes of Muslims and Europeans, young and old, Austrians and Afghans.

The simplicity of the initial premise is complemented by a simplicity of style; crisp editing and un-forceful compositions gently immerse us into the characters’ lives, who together occupy almost every frame of the runtime. Yet, this approach is also a misnomer in itself, with *Nobadi* lulling the audience down a false path of security before violently confronting our prejudices with scenes of extraordinary brutality.

Oddball pairings who overcome prejudice to find common ground underneath is a well-worn genre. There is, of course, common ground between both ostensibly different men. They have both suffered in life. Neither has much to live with. They are both horribly lonely. Yet, these points are never spelled out to us; *Nobadi* rebukes a feel-good narrative in favour of something far harsher. A sharp and surprising turn halfway through spins the hitherto traditional tale on its head, giving off the brief impression that anything can happen. Director Karl Markovics then digs deeper and deeper into the two men’s shared history, allowing the film’s bizarre twists — although shocking — to feel like natural results of character.

Dabbling in a variety of genres — horror, comedy, arthouse, even police procedural — without ever nestling comfortably into any one of them, *Nobadi* is a difficult film to predict or read at any given moment. By refusing the easy approach, Markovics uncovers the higher truth within, offering pertinent commentary on the migrant crisis, Austrian society, and universal prejudice, while never seeping into didacticism. While sure to prove divisive for its sudden lurches into grislier territory, these images feel well-won due to the thorny moral questions they provoke. It asks the question: what if what really unites us isn’t our common goodness, but something much darker indeed? By following this premise through to its natural end, *Nobadi* reveals itself to be a work both slyly profound and oddly entertaining, challenging assumptions right up until the final frame.

[*The Toronto International Film Festival*](https://www.tiff.net/) *runs September 5 – September 15*

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