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'Styx': Film Review | Berlin 2018

10:30 AM PST 2/16/2018 by Boyd van Hoeij

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Courtesy of Benedict Nuenfels

The Bottom Line

Between the doctor and the deep blue sea.

Austrian director Wolfgang Fischer casts actress Susanne Wolff as a woman alone at sea who encounters a vessel full of refugees.

In some ways, *Styx*, about a thirtysomething female doctor from Germany who encounters a leaky trawler filled with refugees when on a solo yachting trip, recalls the Robert-Redford-lost-at-sea title *All Is Lost*. But whereas that film was mostly about the fight of a mute Redford against the elements, here the protagonist is faced with a concrete example of the Western world's indifference towards the refugee crisis.

Not very subtly named after the ancient Greek river that separates our world from the underworld, this new feature from Austrian-born director Wolfgang Fischer is a stark, impressively pared-back parable that leaves most of the big questions off-screen as it focuses on one woman's impossible position between following the orders of the frustratingly invisible coastguard — who tell her to stay completely out of the matter beyond reporting it — and her sense of empathy and duty toward up to 100 human beings who might not survive if no one intervenes in time.

After its Berlinale premiere, where it opened the Panorama Special section, this should notch up a great many festival miles as well as commercial engagements in especially European territories.

More than 20 minutes pass before any meaningful dialogue is uttered, as we see a woman (Susanne Wolff), named Rike in the press notes, go from her hectic day-to-day as a paramedic in Cologne to her setting off solo on her 12-meter yacht, *Asa Gray*, from the monkey-infested British colony Gibraltar. Her destination is Ascension Island, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, between Angola and Brazil. The early going installs a relaxed documentary approach, with the ease with which Rike handles the yacht — Wolff is herself an accomplished sailor — suggesting someone who is meticulous and pragmatic, while her breaks for swimming, tanning and reading up on Darwin's time on Ascension Island suggest she's also someone who knows how to enjoy the simpler things in life.

About 35 minutes in, when Rike finds herself off of the coast of Mauritania, she has to weather a spectacular nighttime storm, filmed in long, penumbral shots by Fischer and ace d.p. Benedict Neuenfels (who worked on the 2008 foreign-language Oscar winner *The Counterfeiters*). The sense of disorientation and being utterly alone in the world is palpably rendered as the vessel is viciously tossed to and fro on the waves and rain lashes down on Rike as she runs around on her yacht, which is barely visible by the red-and-yellow light from the small lamp strapped to her forehead.

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But what was one of the main attractions in *All Is Lost* is really just an appetizer in Fischer and Ika Kuenzel's bare-bones screenplay, which was inspired by a true story. The next morning, when all is calm again, Rike finds herself just several hundred feet away from a fishing trawler filled with refugees, who all desperately call out for help. As maritime law prescribes, she alerts the coastguard but while the reassuring yet stern voice on the radio promises to send a rescue mission, nothing happens for hours. Several of the refugees then jump overboard and one of them, a boy in his early teens (Kenyan find Gedion Oduor Weseka), manages to swim to the *Asa Gray*, where Rike hauls him aboard with great difficulty, as he's exhausted and in a terrible condition. He appeals to her humanity, explaining that his sister is still on the trawler and doesn't understand why she won't come any closer to help them.

Fischer and Kuenzel here create a documentary reality that simultaneously functions as an allegory about the West's ambivalence toward the refugee crisis. Faced with the coastguard's strongly worded prohibition to approach the vessel, also because Rike is alone and her own vessel is too small for 100 people, but also a young boy's plea not to let others like him die, Rike finds herself in an impossible situation. Admirably, the director maintains the documentary illusion throughout, opting for a third act that finds exactly the right, understated tone, neither glorifying Rike's role, nor underplaying the character's more than obvious compassion (she's a doctor, after all, and thus used to saving complete strangers).

Carrying practically the entire film, Wolff is never less than remarkable in a demanding role that's 80 percent silence and 20 percent English-language dialogue. The fully inhabited turn should further help cement her international status as a star to be reckoned with after co-starring in Schloendorff's Anglophone Berlinale competition title *Return to Montauk* from last year.

Filming this cannot have been easy but the assembly is pro on all levels. That said, technically, the biggest stars are the color graders, who have turned the Atlantic into a hypnotic, vacation-brochure blue that sharply contrasts with the life-and-death situation of the refugees. Rescue lines in bright red really pop against the deep-blue sea and are used as a strong visual leitmotif throughout, suggesting all it takes to help is throwing out a line.

Production companies: *Schiwago Film, Amour Fou Vienna*

Cast: Susanne Wolff, Gedion Oduor Weseka
Director: Wolfgang Fischer
Screenplay: Wolfgang Fischer, Ika Kuenzel
Producers: Marcos Kantis, Martin Lehwald, Michal Pokorny
Director of photography: Benedict Neuenfels
Costume designer: Nicole Fischnaller
Editor: Monika Willi
Music: Dirk von Lowtzow
Sales: Beta Cinema
Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Panorama Special)

In English, German
No rating, 94 minutes
