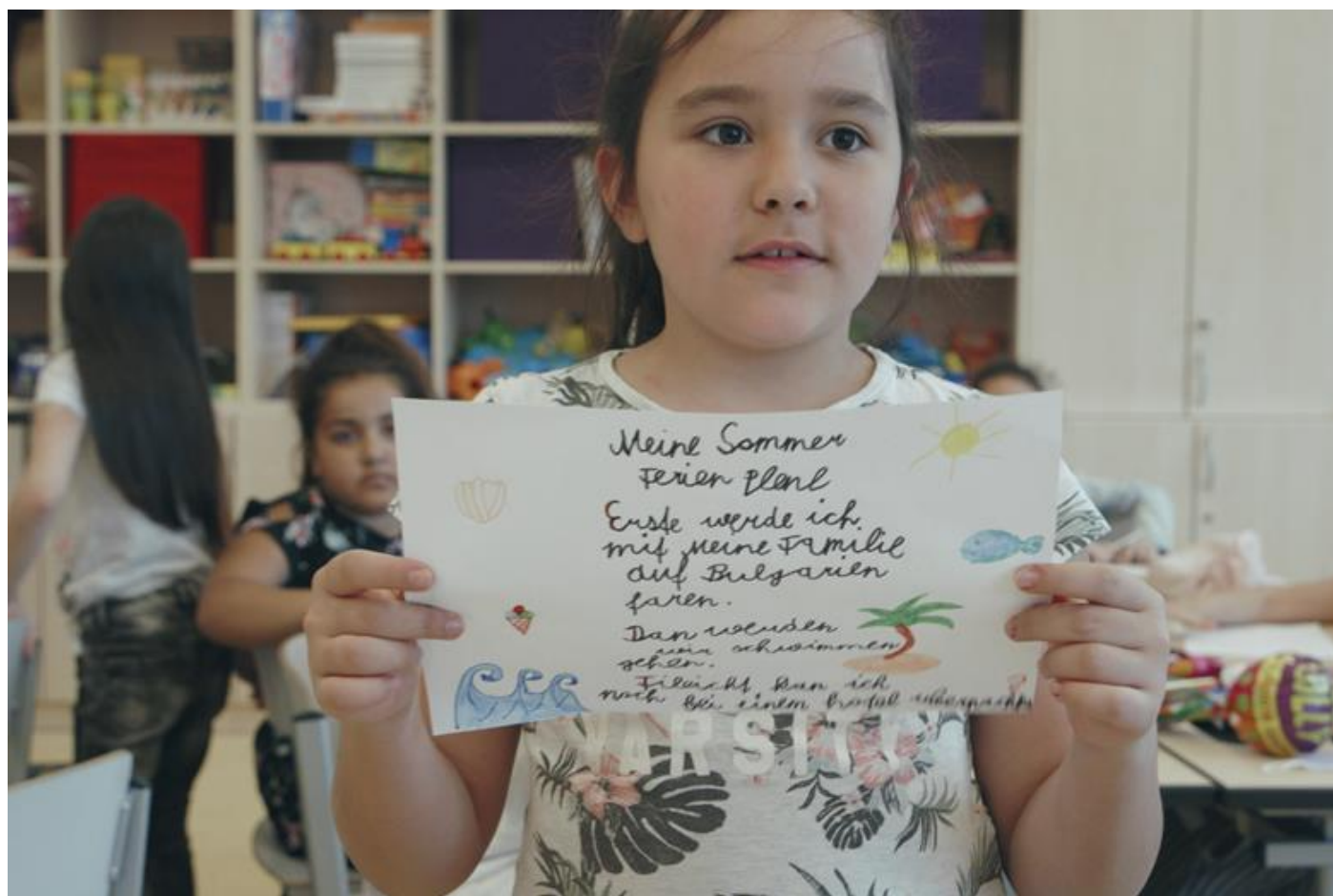


'Favoriten': Berlin Review

BY **NIKKI BAUGHAN** | 16 FEBRUARY 2024

Documentary spends three years following an inner-city Viennese primary school



**SOURCE: BERLIN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
'FAVORITEN'**

Dir: Ruth Beckermann. Austria. 2024. 118mins

In Vienna's multi-cultural, highly-populated Favoriten district, young students at the city's largest primary school begin to prepare for a life beyond its walls. Following the children for three years, between the ages of seven and ten, *Favoriten* effectively navigates ideas of race, community and unity through its endearing, and often surprisingly insightful, subjects.

Respects the many layers of these children's lives and allows them to tell their own stories

Viennese filmmaker Ruth Beckermann returns to open Berlin's Encounters after her previous film *Mutzenbacher* won the section's best film award in 2022. While the subject matter could hardly be more different – *Mutzenbacher* was an study of male attitudes towards sex and erotica – *Favoriten* has a similar light-hearted, exploratory tone that should see it enjoy a healthy festival career and perhaps attract the attention of a streamer or broadcaster.

Favoriten is set almost exclusively within the school walls, making it reminiscent of Nicolas Philibert's 2002 documentary *Etre Et Avoir*, or the Dutch documentary *Miss Kiet's Children*, which also dealt with refugees. The class in *Favoriten* is comprised almost entirely of inner-city children from immigrant families. The fact that German is not their first language is just one of the challenges faced by teacher Ilkay Idiskut in this underprivileged area where a lack of funding and staff is a continuing problem.

Using a music-free, fly-on-the wall approach without on-screen information, Beckermann throws us straight into the hubbub of a busy classroom in which Ilkay is leading the children in a high-energy dance session. We will come to see that Ilkay, who comes from a Turkish family, is a dynamic, unifying force, giving the children space to find their own way but the boundaries they need to feel secure. She encourages debates on difficult subjects and questions the children without ever belittling them. She is also, at least in this part of Vienna, a scarce resource. (When she leaves near the end of the final year to go on maternity leave, there is no-one immediately available to take her place.)

Beckermann and assistant director Elisabeth Menasse give us time to settle into the rhythms of this classroom. Cinematographer Johannes Hammel weaves amongst the tables, keeping his camera resolutely at child's-eye level and lingering on seemingly innocuous interactions; allegiances and antagonisms are revealed, personalities start to emerge. The children, practicing their German, are encouraged to speak about their families. They describe mothers who are mostly housewives, fathers who work in restaurants or construction – some speak about the (better) jobs their parents had back home in Syria, or Turkey. The film then cuts to the students sharing their own hopes for the future; some want to be scientists, others astronauts. The disconnect between real-world experience and ambition is striking.

Favoriten follows the children across three grades between autumn 2020 and spring 2023, with editor Pichler effectively stitching together a narrative which respects the many layers of these

children's lives and allows them to tell their own stories. (Literally so, as the students are given iPhones to film with, the often-candid footage being woven into the latter part of the film.)

One girl, Syrian immigrant Enes, struggles to find the words to explain the war that drove her family from her home; next moment, she is happily dancing to an Austrian version of 'heads, shoulders, knees and toes.' Similarly, some of the boys struggle with feelings of aggression, yet respond well to guided mediation. And that is the biggest lesson to be learned here; while these children have been inevitably shaped by their experiences, they are not – yet – defined by them.

Production company: Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion

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Producer: Ruth Beckermann

Cinematography: Johannes Hammel

Editing: Dieter Pichler

