



Berlinale 2024 review: Favoriten (Ruth Beckermann)

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February 28, 2024





“The film has a good message and that might just be enough – people raised in love, even dislocated, will be mostly okay.”



Favoriten, Vienna’s 10th district, has been a centre of ethnic diversity for centuries, making it a unique microcosm of the immigrant experience in Austria and by extension Europe and the West. It was a regular landing point for people escaping war in the Balkans and later the Middle East. Most large cities have a similar area; often it is the poorest, and often it is the most vibrant. For many years the children of migrants in Favoriten have entered Viennese schools and blended learning taken from their lives at home flavoured with the cultural paraphernalia of diverse national and cultural experiences, with the standardised teaching of the Austrian education system. Whatever the result is – some blend of clash, assimilation, accommodation and amplification – is well worthy of documenting. And so steps forward Ruth Beckermann, a successful and well-established Austrian filmmaker known for sensitive exploration of cultural heritage and dislocation; most notably from the Jewish diaspora, seen in films like *The Paper Bridge* (1987) and *Towards Jerusalem* (1991).

In Beckermann’s film, a single class from a school in Favoriten is followed for three school years – from year 2 (ages 6 to 7) to year 4, when they are 9. They have a single teacher during this period, and while there are small vignettes of life outside school, the central, dominant device of the film is unobtrusive filming from the corner of the classroom. The shooting is unremarkable; whether by choice or available equipment, the camera is neither wide such that we can see the whole class, nor telephotographic enough to really lose us in a detail.

There is no story per se, though some contrivances provide a sense of narrativization – after discussing dancing we see a boy dancing, after a discussion about bullying we see something that looks like bullying, an early conversation about swimming later has us seeing the children have a swimming class. But mostly what we have instead is a best attempt at careful watching. Children are interesting to watch and Beckermann makes the professional guess that these children, especially, will reward careful and enduring observation. She isn’t wrong. This is the gentlest and slightest of films, but we learn about war, the accommodations of different cultures, attitudes towards women, gender roles and how children relate to parents likely traumatised by their dislocation (and whatever led to that dislocation). *Favoriten* is absolutely rich in content, though without being minute-by-minute captivating in and of itself; I found myself picking up on a reflected theme, for example the discussion about who can tell a woman what to wear, and drifting off into my own thoughts, experiences and ideas on the subject. I had the advantage of watching the film at home and being able to pause and ponder, but I don’t know what the cinematic experience would have been – as soon as I was

thinking about gender roles, I'd be thinking about war next, then striving in the immigrant experience, then the generic clothing systems of 21st century childhood (all of the boys wear videogame T-shirts most of the time). It might be overwhelming, though you might also relate to the film differently.

There are wonderful and illustrative scenes. In one, some boys try to explain to each other what culture is. It is, they say, when you do things in a certain way but a way in which you do them in your country. Or, as another says, "*You and I like going outside, so that's our culture.*" But how could a child understand what it means to belong to a cultural group while also living in Austria and wearing Fortnite T-shirts? Do we even know what it is? It's a lovely example of what this film can evoke. Another scene, one of the few outside of the school, has boys walking along the Favoritenstrasse market asking for samples of fruit, which the sellers happily give them. It has all the joy that older generations tell us their childhood echoed. It speaks to communities that cherish children and children comfortable within them – I felt a sudden yearning for such a community.

Some things might go amiss by not being a German speaker – the accents, the early stumbling as children learn, the sense of trying. Though as a non-German speaker it's actually quite delightful to hear it spoken in such a simple, unadorned way that even I could pick up (I was learning with the children!).

But what audiences outside of Austria will have sight of, as a potential unintended consequence, is the Austrian (and potentially Germanic) education system in operation. As a professional in Children's Mental Health, I can tell you it is different to the UK system; in this film we see a much deeper sense of collective conformity. British systems, and I assume others, play out the positives within a group but refrain from showing individual failings in such a public arena. It was genuinely quite shocking to see someone brave enough to give a presentation (on the water cycle, no less) and see the other children encouraged to give criticism; equally, to see the end-of-year reports delivered verbally in front of the other children. It was saddening to see a child told she had spent the year not listening, just after another child was told how well they had done. Perhaps there is merit to its groundedness; the film made me think, and likely will make others think too.

The star of the film is the kids' teacher, Ilkay Idiskut. Herself Turkish by birth, she has a wry, gentle balance of delicacy and toughness. She is a captivating character, and we want to know more about her; she feels like the lead character of her own bittersweet film. Watching her wake the children as they rise from a guided relaxation is a joy, while watching her challenge boys who would echo their parents in choosing what girls should and shouldn't wear is a controlled slow burn. Funnily, perhaps perspicaciously, she simply couldn't be more Austrian even if she is Turkish.

In the end, this is a hopeful film. By and large the kids are okay, they are going to be fine, and

they seem well-armed with humour and friendship to survive the next (potentially trickier) phases of their education and lives. The film has a good message and that might just be enough – people raised in love, even dislocated, will be mostly okay.



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