

## WELCOME

France, 2009, d. Philippe Lioret. Berlin Panorama



A film to be welcomed (and winner of an Ecumenical Jury award in Berlin, 2009).

Xenophobia, whether racially or economically motivated (or both), is an emotional (and irrational) disease that corrodes individuals and societies.

The wars, revolutions and persecutions that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century still take their toll. On the other hand, the greater social awareness which the often (justly) maligned media can take a great deal of credit for, means that the phobias can be identified more readily as they surface and can be combated.

Welcome is a helpful contribution to this kind of awareness, especially in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and the consequent upheaval in that country and in the region. Welcome is obviously an ironic title.

Director, Philippe Lioret, says he opted for a feature film fiction rather than a documentary, even though there is much documentary material throughout the film. It concerns young Iraqi men and boys trudging and getting lifts through Europe to Calais and their so often futile attempts to pay their way and hid in stringently examined trucks to cross the Channel to England.

The French, concerned for years about the retention camps on the coast and refugees' attempts to hide under the Eurostar, have a special force to police solely for the illegals. And illegal it is for local citizens to shelter the refugees and they too are policed as are the volunteers staffing soup kitchens.

This is all there in Welcome.

The fictional narrative focuses on a 17 year old Kurd, Bilal (Firat Ayverdi), who wants to reach England to be with his girlfriend whose family are legal residents in London. Joining the group at Calais, he assumes that it is easy enough (with a fee to a 'handler') to cross to England. Not so.

An athlete and hoping to play for Manchester United, he decides he will swim the Channel and goes to a local pool for lessons. He meets the coach, Simon (Vincent Lindon) who has been a swimming champion but did not reach full potential. He still loves his wife (a soup kitchen manager who chides him about his head in the sand attitudes towards the illegals) who is divorcing him.

The story is emotionally powerful as Simon keeps helping the very polite Bilal, is questioned by the police and finds in Bilal a substitute for the son he never had.

The rest of the film is not easy, as it never could be. At one sad moment, the audience audibly sobbed so much had the characters gotten to them.

A hope would be that Welcome, while not solving any political or economic problems, would get to audience humanity and sense of compassion.

