



Welcome

(France) A Mars Distribution release of a Nord-Ouest presentation of a Nord-Ouest Films, Studio 37, France 3 Cinema, Mars Films, Fin Aout Production production, with the participation of Canal Plus, Cinecinema, in association with Artemis Prods. (International sales: Films Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Christophe Rossignon.

Directed by Philippe Lioret. Screenplay, Lioret, Emmanuel Courcol, Olivier Adam.

With: Vincent Lindon, Firat Ayverdi, Audrey Dana, Derya Ayverdi, Thierry Godard, Selim Akgul, Firat Celik, Murat Subasi, Olivier Raboutin, Yannick Renier, Mouafaq Rushdie, Behi Djanati Atai, Patrick Ligardes, Jean-Pol Brissart, Blandine Pelissier. (French, English, Kurdish dialogue)

By JAY WEISSBERG

A young Iraqi Kurd stranded in France needs to get across the English Channel in “Welcome,” an emotionally affecting drama that reinforces Philippe Lioret’s reputation for classic Euro filmmaking at its smoothest. A superb director of actors, Lioret blends French professionals with Kurdish amateurs in a seamless mix that papers over moments when the script is weakened by standardization. Though the issue of illegal immigration is nothing new in French cinema, “Welcome” makes audiences care deeply for its absorbing characters. Travel across borders should be much easier for the pic than for its protagonists, with warm welcomes on both sides of the Atlantic.

Refugees arrive in the coastal city of Calais hoping to make the crossing into England, but border controls are strict and French immigration laws hopeless. Seventeen-year-old Bilal (Firat Ayverdi, in an impressive debut) thinks he’s reached the easiest stage of his three-month journey from Mosul, but a chance meeting with old friend Zoran (Selim Akgul) clues him in to the dangers ahead.

Caught attempting to smuggle himself in a truck’s hold, Bilal, like so many refugees in France, is stuck in legal limbo. Driven by love for his g.f. back home, Mina (Derya Ayverdi), whose family, opposed to the match, now lives in London, Bilal hits on the idea of taking swimming lessons at the municipal pool and trains to swim across the English Channel.

Instructor Simon (Vincent Lindon) doesn’t catch on at first, seeing Bilal as just another refugee with a bit more pocket change than most. Crushing loneliness since his wife Marion (Audrey Dana) left him, the teacher isn’t free from local prejudice. But when he realizes Bilal’s plan, Simon tries to dissuade him from the folly of swimming the channel in winter. His protectiveness toward the teen increases when the authorities try to block him from offering aid of any kind.

Script largely keeps politics at the personal level, using Bilal’s inability to reach a country he literally sees across the water to starkly point out the irrational categorizations of us (Westerners with passports) vs. them (refugees). Bilal is clearly middle-class, a soccer champ with dreams of playing professionally and a drive taken straight out of “Romeo and Juliet.” Not one to wallow in self-pity, he keeps his sights fixed firmly on the horizon.

In contrast, Simon is stuck in the past, with both career and marriage gone belly-up. Though there's a certain unoriginality in the idea of a troubled man finding his righteous core, the fine dialogue avoids platitudes, helped in great measure by stellar turns from both vet Lindon and newcomer Ayverdi.

Lindon, his eyes literally weighed down with sadness, carries himself with the air of a man beaten emotionally but not physically. Ayverdi, a graceful, instinctive performer, conveys a quick working comprehension, keeping Bilal's trauma just below the surface while facing each new challenge. The two protags largely communicate in English, which both men handle naturally.

A beautiful sense of rhythm and structure generally mark Lioret's style (most recently "Don't Worry, I'm Fine"), and Laurent Dailland's lensing often goes beyond a certain unprepossessing handsomeness to something transcendent. Trucks crisscrossing Calais harbor form a memorable image, but an overhead sequence of the choppy, dark channel waters is the kind of scene that grabs hold of the gut as well as the brain.

Camera (color, widescreen), Laurent Dailland; editor, Andrea Sedlackova; music, Nicola Piovani, Wojciech Kilar, Armand Amar; production designer, Yves Brover; costume designer, Fanny Drouin; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), Pierre Mertens, Laurent Quaglio, Eric Tisserand; line producer, Eve Machuel; associate producer, Philip Boeffard; assistant directors, Isabelle Henry, Jessica Palud; casting, Tatiana Vialle. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Panorama), Feb. 7, 2009. Running time: 109 MIN.