

'ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL': TEACHING AWAY IN OBLIVION

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Finally out in Turkish theaters after its world premiere at last year's International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, **Özgür Doğan** and **Orhan Eskiköy's** "İki Dil Bir Bavul" (On The Way To School) not only managed to sweep a significant number of prizes in its festival run, recently receiving prizes at Antalya's Golden Orange and Abu Dhabi's Middle East International Film Festival, it might also attract an ample number of viewers in its national theatrical run thanks to the spread of its reputation by word of mouth for the past year.

And considering the government's recent Kurdish initiative, the film will surely help further facilitate the already ongoing debates.

Probably one of the best creative documentaries to come out of Turkey, the film follows the trials and tribulations of a young Turkish school teacher posted to an ethnic Kurdish village in southeastern Turkey for one school year. The film refuses to use any talking heads and interviews and sticks to solely following the on-the-spot happenings that teacher Emre Aydın experiences in the village and the classroom with his Kurdish students, who don't speak a word of Turkish.

One of the most startling elements in the film is the amount of access that the directors have gained for their production -- we basically witness anything that goes on in the classroom.

The documentary starts with a long bus journey: The fresh university graduate, Emre, has just received his first official post as a teacher; his post is in the small village of Demirci near Şanlıurfa. The thing is, this is the first time that Emre is going to the Southeast, since he's from the western city of Denizli. And despite the initial excitement of his first job and sojourn, he soon realizes that things are much different from what he expected.

There is only one classroom in the village for all the students; constant electricity cuts and water shortages are considered normal. The school building is the only landmark that implies the existence of the state, and everyone, except for a couple of men, speaks Kurdish, while Emre doesn't speak a word of Kurdish. Emre might have arrived in the village with a different curriculum in mind, but now his sole mission transforms into that of teaching the official language of the country to a

classroom of Kurdish students ranging from 6 to 12 years old.

This turns out to be more difficult than he can fathom since the kids solely speak Kurdish at their homes as well and have no interaction with anyone who speaks Turkish, since they hardly venture out of the village. Emre's desperation reaches peak levels as his loneliness and almost fruitless efforts take hold of him. He constantly calls his mother complaining about his situation.

Alas, despite Emre's desperation, there is something magical that happens within the classroom. Despite the communication problems, the teacher and the kids grow to love each other. Perhaps the kids have a difficult time learning Turkish, but they come to the classroom enthusiastically every morning. Directors Doğan and Eskiköy shoot the

classroom scenes brilliantly, not only capturing the most desperate and frustrating situations, but also showing the humanistic and affectionate relationship that develops in the class. Some instances are tragic-comic, and perhaps this is what makes the film so touching -- we see Emre desperately trying to teach the alphabet to the students, and his expressions are priceless. He knows that he is trying in vain, almost on the edge of a nervous laughter, but he insists in trying nevertheless; after all, the students are trying to learn. And as the end of the school year approaches, we see that some students have learned Turkish and some have not, but the real question is whether anything will really change in the life of the kids.

"On the Way to School" realistically presents the current situation of the Kurds in southeastern Anatolia without sugarcoating the truth: there is a high Kurdish population in

the Southeast that has been ignored by the state and lives in utter destitution. Without reaching a truthful dialogue on the state socially and economically trying to take care of all its citizens, one wonders how meaningful and fruitful it is to place a priority on teaching Turkish to a handful of Kurdish kids deserted in the remote parts of the country.

One thing is for sure: the film is an admirable effort in showing the peaceful efforts of individuals in trying to establish communication in a country where we are used to seeing violent conflict instead of amicable dialogue.

"On the Way to School" is a must-see for every citizen of Turkey.

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