

Welcome

France / Belgium

Cert 15 2009 109 min

Credits

A film by	Phillipe Lioret
Screenplay	Philippe Lioret Emmanuel Courcol Olivier Adam
Cinematography	Laurent Dailland
Editor	Andréa Sedlacková
Art Director	Yves Brover

Cast

Vincent Lindon	Simon
Firat Ayverdi	Bilal
Audrey Dana	Marion
Derya Ayverdi	Mina
Thierry Godard	Bruno
Selim Akgül	Zoran
Firat Celik	Koban
Murat Subasi	Mirko
Olivier Rabourdin	Police Lieutenant

Synopsis

Calais, 2008.

Bilal, a 17-year-old Kurdish boy, has endured a harrowing journey through the Middle East and Europe in an attempt to join his girlfriend Mina in England. Freshly arrived at Calais, he pays a handler to smuggle him on to the ferry in a lorry, but the attempt fails and Bilal is arrested, though he is released without charge. Determined to make the crossing somehow, Bilal decides he will swim the Channel to England.

At the local swimming pool, he meets Simon, a disaffected swimming instructor in the midst of a divorce from his liberal activist wife Marion. Simon agrees to train Bilal. As the two grow closer, Simon offers Bilal shelter at his apartment - much to Marion's pleasant surprise and the disapproval of his xenophobic neighbour, who informs the police that Simon is harbouring an illegal immigrant, leading to Simon's arrest.

Abridged from Sight & Sound, Nov 2009.



Review

The title is ironic as Bilal (Firat Ayverdi), a 17-year-old Kurd, quickly discovers on arriving in Calais after a three-month trek from Iraq. Filled with a sense that the worst of his journey is behind him, he hopes he will soon be locked in a reunion, on the British side of the channel, with the love of his life, Mina (Derya Ayverdi). But, in the world of illegal migration, effort and desire are not necessarily rewarded by success. Calais, far from being a mere stepping stone towards a new life, is, for many, a place of limbo, where the dreams of many looking to reach Britain are drowned by the reality of the English Channel.

This makes Philippe Lioret's latest sound as though it is a fairly grim diatribe on the tribulations of would-be migrants but, cleverly, the stark realism is here used to provide a backdrop to an engaging drama running on 'father and son' lines, rather than as a be-all and end-all. Bilal's first attempt to cross the Channel - courtesy of people smugglers who stash migrés in trucks - ends in disaster, so in desperation he decides to try to swim across... the only snag being that he can barely complete a stroke. Unabashed by this, he signs up for lessons at his local pool and it is here that his path crosses that of Simon (Vincent Lindon) - a former top-flight swimmer whose life is empty since wife Marion (Audrey Dana) left him for another man.

These men are from vastly different backgrounds and ages, with one fixated on nothing but the future and the other unable to stop dwelling on the past, but they are both, in their own way, little boys lost. Although not realising Bilal's scheme at first Simon quickly cottons on and does all he can to hold the youngster back, initially to impress Marion - who spends her evenings running a soup kitchen for migrants down by the docks. Yet he soon finds himself drawn to Bilal's passion even as it reflects the love he himself has lost. This coupled with the prejudice that surrounds the young Kurd, leads Simon to take on an increasingly protective role towards him, despite the fact that he risks prosecution by doing so.

By keeping the focus firmly on the personal relationship between the two men - and by making them fully rounded characters with genuine strengths and weaknesses - Lioret lifts his story out of cliché and into a place where emotions flourish. Lindon is masterful in the role of Simon, like a world-weary cross between Daniel Auteuil and Peter Mullan, while Ayverdi brings just the right mix of youthful fervour and fearlessness to the part of Bilal. By making us care deeply about this unlikely duo, we are able to feel the outrages of the battle Bilal faces, both from the general public and the law enforcement services, all the more keenly. And if one or two of the latter plot developments require a small leap of faith, Lioret never loses sight of reality and a world in which endings are rarely served up in a box tied neatly with a bow.

Amber Wilkinson, Eye for Film