

# JOURNAL DE BOYD

LUXFILMFEST  
FESTIVAL EDITION

#9

14/3  
2021

## BEYOND

The winners of this year's film festival, Jasmila Zbanic' fiction feature *Quo Vadis, Aida?* and the documentary *Nemesis* by Thomas Imbach, are both works of immense directorial precision.

## THE

## SURFACE

Bosnian director Jasmila Zbanic burst onto the international filmmaking scene in 2006 with her first feature, *Grbavica*, which won the Golden Bear in Berlin. Since then, her films — which include *On the Path* and *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* — have looked at both the present and recent past of the region, with the present often heavily influenced by the Yugoslav Wars that erupted in the early 1990s.

The scars and aftershocks — emotional as well as socio-political — of those dramatic events are a recurring leitmotif in Zbanic' oeuvre, with her films helping people in the region make sense of their traumas and helping them move on without making them forget it. Here, for the first time, she sets almost an entire film in the past, as *Quo Vadis, Aida?* recounts the 1995 Srebrenica Massacre from the point of view of the titular Aida, an English teacher who is forced to become an interpreter for the UN forces who were supposed to protect the Bosnian population from Mladic' Bosnian Serb Army.

Because *Aida* is translating for the UN forces on the ground, who are themselves not getting a lot of cooperation from their higher-ups who aren't present in the region, she seems to realize before many others what might be about to happen. This makes her very worried not only for her people but specifically for her own family and she needs to figure out how she can best serve both her young country and her loved ones while trying to prevent a disaster.

*Aida* as a protagonist is well chosen by Zbanic, who also wrote the screenplay, because she's an impartial onlooker who finds herself at the very heart of the conflict. Similarly, the actress playing her, Jasna Duričić, is well chosen because she's not only the best person for the job — generally projecting strength and lucidity but sometimes mixed with hopeless confusion and doubt — but she's also Serbian, underlining the extent to which the film doesn't want to serve as a vehicle for the kind of line-drawing and facile jingoistic nationalism that caused the conflict in the first place.

Methodically and with great insight into politics, military operations and human behaviour, *Quo Vadis, Aida?* marches towards a massacre foretold. It's a masterful film that keeps its eyes open and its finger on the pulse,

to bear witness to what happened not so long ago and what might happen again if we don't pay attention to what is going on around us.

The sense of multiple views and historic change also pervades our documentary competition winner, *Nemesis*. Director Thomas Imbach shot the film over seven years from his own windows, which, at the start of the film, look out over the old freight railway station of Zurich but which, seven years later, has made room for a new prison.

For seven years, the destruction of the train station, the preparation of the grounds for a massive new construction site and finally the construction of the prison are witnessed in wider views as well as surprising closeups. Human activity on this large a scale can seem incredibly impressive and it does lead to some very poetic images (Imbach shot, rather incredibly, on 35mm).

But the feature is anything but a hymn to human prowess or progress. Throughout, we hear the stories of rejected asylum seekers in voice over. They aren't introduced or labelled and start to blend into one plaintive song about human misery. The choice is both courageous and on the money, as the prison that is being constructed will house many detainees with stories like the ones we hear. From the incredible feats of construction and engineering we see and the joy of a one-off summer festival that occurs on the construction site before building begins, the film transforms into something much darker.

Why are we as humans pouring so much money and effort into making other people's lives hell? What does it mean to have been born or live in a rich country like Switzerland, so often used as a paradigm of neutrality in international conflicts. Imbach's film shows that looking outside your own window, if you know how and where to look, can reveal a modern world that's technologically advanced and impressive but that finds itself on a moral precipice from which it will be very hard to pull back.

Both *Nemesis* and *Quo Vadis, Aida?* are illuminating features about the world we live in today and how humans try to navigate the complexity of modern life, where a lot of suffering might be hiding behind brand new surfaces or seemingly friendly faces.

BOYD VAN HOEIJ @FILMBOYD