

Swiss Director Markus Imhoof Discusses Refugee Doc 'Eldorado'

In his most personal film yet, the laureled Swiss gives faces to the refugees looking to make a life in a Europe that often only sees them as numbers

By Jamie Lang



With a subject as divisive and ubiquitous as the current refugee crisis facing Europe and the world, it can be difficult to come at the issue with a fresh take, but by paralleling stories from WWII and modern day Italy and Switzerland, "Eldorado," which world premieres at this year's [Berlin Film Festival](#), presents its viewers with a narrative that may have been previously overlooked.

Imhoof comes at the film not simply as a director looking for a story, but as a person with a refugee tale of his own, that goes back to his early childhood when his Swiss family took in a young Italian refugee. The story of Markus and Giovanna's adoptive childhoods are interwoven with modern day accounts from a number of African and Middle Eastern refugees, and it's hard not to notice the similarities.

"Eldorado" comes six years after Imhoof's last feature, "More Than Honey," which is par for the deliberate course of his career. Imhoof takes his time when developing films, and the results speak volumes about his methods. His films have earned the director dozens of award nominations, festival competitions and, in the case of 1981's similarly-themed historical fiction "The Boat is Full," a foreign-language Oscar nomination.

Imhoof's resume clearly indicates that he is a director with a social conscience, that isn't afraid to put his personal history to bare for audiences. In the case of "Eldorado," he even shares letters, pictures and toys from his own childhood. It's that personal touch that fans of his work recognize and appreciate, and with "Eldorado," begs the question; If the people who took in refugees during WWII were seen as admirable, what does that make people that want to turn them away today?

In preparation for the film's world premiere on Thursday Feb 22., Imhoof talked to *Variety* about the film, his own story and why people need to see his film.

Who was this movie made for?

40 years ago I made a film about the story of Jewish refugees being saved to Switzerland and then sent back to Germany. People didn't know that, and it became a big issue for the public, and internationally the film went to Berlinale and won several prizes. So starting from a personal story, I tried to move people to think in another way about their relationship to the rest of the world. As you see in the film, the discussion is from my point of view as a child, when I discovered I think of myself as "I", and everyone sees themselves as "I." This conflict where everybody is "I," maybe all together can be "we," or "us." I once made a film about bees, and the hive. Is it our hive, our family? Our country? Europe, or maybe the whole world? So really it's about our position in rest of the world when there is conflict.

How many of the letters the narrators read, props and stories from the past were real?

They are all real. This is all the real story of my life, and those are my childhood drawings and nothing was invented for the film. Even the doll that Joanna gave to my mother that she had just won from a soup contest. We still have the doll, and it's all real.

How did you cast the voice for one of your closest childhood friends?

She is so real for me. I don't disclose in the film that she died when she was 14, but in my real life, she is real. When I moved to Milan her mother took care of our kids. I talk to her like I talk to my parents who are both dead. They are still present in my memory. One question was, for me it's a young voice. I'm an old man, but she remains the young voice she had. First we thought she could have got older after she died, parallel to my age, but it was completely wrong. I did casting with about 50 young women in Rome but I only talked to them on the phone, because I didn't want to see them. I wanted to find the voice corresponding to my memories.

How will the film be distributed?

First it will premiere at the Berlinale, which is a good trampoline of course. It opens next month in Switzerland, then in April in Germany and Austria and this autumn in France. We hope that we can get more distribution. I don't know how the U.S. will react to the film. Of course it's a European story but it's also an eternal and international story.

Beyond theatrical what are your plans for the film? Was there any TV involved in the production?

Swiss and German public TV were both involved in the production. Of course we hope after theatrical to work out something on VOD and television. It's important that as many people as possible can see it. If you see the discussion about the German coalition, or if you see what's happening in Austria in the elections, refugees are a very big issue in the public and political discussions, but they never speak about people, just numbers. Of course that's why I try to let them exist and be part of the discussion. I have a list of all the people who have died trying to come to Europe. It's 33,000 names, sometimes without names because they just found bodies. If you have a face and personal story, these 33,000 people become something else. If you learn to see one of them.

How do you think this movie will be viewed in the future?

It's said that history is being written in the present. This will be history in 40 years, so better if we think now what that history will be.

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