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Feb 16, 2024 4:19am PT

## 'Favoriten' Review: The Classroom Is a Community in a Lively, Poignant Primary-Education Doc

Austrian director Ruth Beckermann filmed a Viennese grade-school class over three years to deliver a vibrant, provocative and ultimately optimistic portrait of good kids responding to good teaching.

By **Jessica Kiang** ▾



Courtesy of Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion, Berlin Film Festival

The kids in Ilkay Idiskut's third grade class are, as they let you know within about five minutes of [Ruth Beckermann's](#) delightful Berlin Encounters documentary "[Favoriten](#)," very much their own people. These 25 boisterous, funny, clattering seven-year-olds attend the largest elementary school in Vienna and for the most part hail from migrant family backgrounds from Turkey or Syria or Georgia. Diminutive in form but outsized in personality, they are also, however, eminently likable and relatable, and you can find all the various versions of your own grade-school self

in one or other of them at some point. The class clown. The naughty kid. The slacker. The braniac. Or the eager doofus enduring the very specific agony that is knowing the right answer, and waving your arm madly in the air, only to not be called on.

That we can instantly feel so cosy with these children is down to some canny and compassionate choices from a filmmaker more often known for a probing sternness. Indeed, despite the classroom setting, the slightly schoolmarmish tone that at times crept into Beckermann's "Mutzenbacher," which won the same Encounters section in 2022, is entirely, joyously absent here. Instead, with Johannes Hammel's warmly inquisitive hand-held camera pitched down at desk-level, we are in amongst the class from the beginning, observing interactions that occur with an often hilarious naturalism that makes it clear how quickly the children adapted to and absorbed the presence of the skeleton doc crew. It helps that at this age, most have not yet learned much in the way of shame or self-consciousness.

Those are lessons the world will teach them soon enough. But they have no place in the classroom run by their exemplary teacher, Ilkay. Young, personable and energetic – the film is peppered with entertainingly uncoordinated dancing sessions – Ilkay is probably the subject of a lot of early crushes. But she is not so much their friend that she commands no respect, and her skills in conflict resolution would put many a UN negotiator to shame. Ilkay teaches across all subjects, from German (for most not the language spoken at home) to math to physical education. And since she stays with the same set of kids over three years as they move from third into fourth and then fifth grade – the final year of primary education in Austria – the mutual bonds of familiarity and trust build. Those bonds, as well as the friendships and rivalries between classmates, do indeed make the cheerful schoolroom into, as Ilkay calls it "a community." And when that community is threatened, as by an instance of bullying late on that forces Ilkay to address the whole class in uncharacteristically somber terms, you can see how their beloved teacher's severe disappointment registers as punishment enough on the faces of her charges.

Beckermann's decision to film for such a long period must surely have yielded an enormous amount of footage that did not make the final two-hour cut. But the judicious honing of the material not only allows the film to flow, it makes commentary on the Austrian schooling system's failures, such as understaffing and lack of language-learning support for non-native speakers, all the more eloquent for being evoked rather than underlined. It is also one way "Favoriten" – named, incidentally for the Vienna district in which the school is located – sets itself apart from Maria Speth's "Mr Bachmann And His Class," another expansive German-language documentary featuring a great teacher and the students he inspired. Here, despite Ilkay's pivotal role, and occasional input from other teachers and parents, the children are the real stars. Watching them navigate difficult issues, under Ilkay's sensitive guidance, especially those in which secular and religious values come into conflict with aspects of religious orthodoxy is an illuminating privilege, and often a very funny one, as when a group of boys attempt with reckless and completely

misplaced bravado to define the abstract concept of “culture” to each other.

There’s a certain “Boyhood”-esque aspect to how the children change over this period. Even their features lose a little of their childish softness and gain a few angles so that both physically and behaviorally, you fancy you can glimpse the adults they are going to become. It’s a process that seems to have affected Beckermann too, making “Favoriten” one of her most straightforwardly enjoyable films and perhaps that’s no wonder. It’s hard not to be scathing when investigating male attitudes to female sexuality as in “Mutzenbacher” or the Nazi past of a former world leader, as in her 2018 Austrian Oscar entry “The Waldheim Waltz.” But it is more or less impossible to watch these kids begin to grow up and not feel, despite an edge of existential sadness at the passing of childhood’s sweetest phase, the vague stirrings of a strange warm feeling with regard to the future that, if I recall correctly, is called hope.

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Berlin Film Festival, Favoriten, Ruth Beckermann

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#### **‘Favoriten’ Review: The Classroom Is a Community in a Lively, Poignant Primary-Education Doc**

**Reviewed at Delphi Lux, Berlin (in Berlin Film Festival — Encounters). Feb. 14, 2024. Running time: 118 MIN.**

**Production:** (Documentary, Austria) A Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion production. (World sales: Outlook, Vienna.) Producer: Ruth Beckermann.

**Crew:** Director: Ruth Beckermann. Screenplay: Ruth Beckermann, Elisabeth Menasse. Camera: Johannes Hammel. Editor: Dieter Pichler.

**With:** Ilkay Idiskut, Nerjiss Aldebi, Liemar Aljouma, Egemen Ak, Majeda Alshammaa, Enes Kerim Bölüktaş, Melisa Bulduk, Furkan Çongar, Dani Crnkić, Eda Dzhemal, Beid Emmini, Arian Grošić, Elif Gürdal, Rebeca Harambaşa, Ibrahim Ibrahimovič, Alper Ismetov, Davut Kaplan, Manessa Lakhal, Mohammed Maksoud, Selen Mehmedova, Selin Mehmedova, Teodora Mladenović, Hafsa Polat, Natalia Sălăgean, Danilo Tomić, David Tomic, Amina Tungaev, Valentin Vujcic, Fatima Yapici. (German dialogue)

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