

Interview with Yasemin Samderelli

Sergi Doladé. Director of the International Association of Independent Producers of the Mediterranean (APIMED)

Yasemin Samderelli (Dortmund, Germany, 1973) is a German scriptwriter and filmmaker of Turkish origin. Her film *Almanya: Welcome to Germany* has been a great success both in her own country and abroad. The film focuses on the changes that take place in the life of a Turkish couple that emigrate to Germany in search of work and, some years later, along with their children and grandchildren, return to their native village for a holiday. The film is a moving reflection on immigration: the new experience facing migrants, the difficulties they have to overcome (different customs, language) and the effort they make to achieve a better life. Moreover, the film explores the things migrants have to give up, and the memories left behind when taking a new direction.

Sergi Doladé: Place of birth vs. country of residence is explored in your latest film *Almanya: Welcome to Germany* (2011), which has been shown in many international film festivals and even distributed in other countries after its success in Germany. How did the German audience react to it at first? And how does the international audience respond to the film?

Yasemin Samderelli: The Germans proved once again that their sense of humour is better than their reputation. A lot of them really enjoyed seeing their own culture through the eyes of this Turkish family. They loved the gibberish. The Turkish community was really happy about the fact that we portrayed a normal Turkish family rather than showing extreme violence and disharmony again. Some old Turkish men and women said that for them it was

very emotional since they saw so much of their own stories and emotions on screen.

S.D.: You co-wrote the script together with your sister Nesrin. How was the creative/work process and how did you balance both visions in the story?

Y.S.: Nesrin and I have worked together for almost 20 years now. It sounds crazy but it's the truth. When I left for film school, I was 19 and Nesrin 14. She was always a very talented writer and even at this early stage she would help with my scripts. We have just continued over all these years to work and write together. So we are a good team.

S.D.: The father figure is very present in the film, although the mother is also important.



Poster of the film *Almanya: Welcome to Germany*.

Was this intended from the beginning or did both characters evolve during the scriptwriting for a particular reason?

Y.S.: I think that the characters were always very strong, even in the first draft of the script. What we definitely wanted to show was that the image of the intolerant, violent father is not the only truth out there. We wanted to show a more realistic father/grandfather figure. A man who is not always really happy with how things change in his family doesn't mean violence is the only way to react. I know a lot of people like the figure of Hüseyin. On the other hand, we wanted to show that just because a woman wears a headscarf, it doesn't mean that she has nothing to say in the relationship. That is another cliché. A headscarf doesn't necessarily mean that this woman is a victim.

S.D.: Is there any ideological or political motivation behind this enchanting comedy?

Y.S.: Yes, making a good movie was our goal and that will be the same for our future. We are filmmakers, storytellers and naturally doing this as well as possible is the goal of all filmmakers.

S.D.: The political content is not very dominant in the film although there is a certain balance between recent history and the present. What is the benefit of making a comedy film in this particular way?

Y.S.: Let's put it this way. Let's say you start a sentence like this: today I want to give a lecture about problem XY which is costing a lot of misery... Or you start: let me tell you

an amazing story. This story is so wonderful, so heart-warming, that you forget everything around you, even your own problems... What works better?

S.D.: How did you come up with the aesthetic of the film? It seems the film has this naïve or kitsch tone. Why is this?

Y.S.: Yes, the movie has a very subjective, almost fairytale, beauty in some parts. Others are quite realistic. Here again the story and the characters lead to a certain aesthetic. We wanted to show the subjective reality of the figures. When, for example, my grandfather used to tell me as a little girl that one day he kidnapped my grandmother I of course imagined this whole thing in my own head. In my head my grandfather was a good-looking prince and my grandmother was, of course, the prettiest girl in the village. We researched a lot and I looked through a lot of super 8 footage which my grandfather had shot in the seventies and then we knew how we wanted things to look.

S.D.: Life and death are confronted in the film, as are family and culture. Are those subjects dramatically essential for you?

Y.S.: Well, that's hard to say. They are part of life so they can be part of stories but not necessarily. I'm sure that there are a lot of great stories to be told that don't deal with these themes and still make great movies.

S.D.: The film portrays a magical village in Turkey. Was this how you imagined your family's country when you were little? Is this the image that they had or is it an image that you created?

Y.S.: We were looking for a certain universally beautiful place. We wanted to show that if you think back to your childhood it always seems to be beautiful memories, beautiful landscapes. So again, it's more connected to the story and the subjectivity of the storytelling. Once we found this little village, we did not do much. We just removed a few antennas but the rest is just how it looks in reality. But then again you have to know where to put the camera, which lens to use, etc.

S.D.: Being a *Gastarbeiter*¹ in the sixties was not the same as being a *Gastarbeiter* today. What are the main differences and similarities?

Y.S.: The big difference is that, in those days, people knew that Germany needed *Gastarbeiter* to get back on its feet. After the war, the economy was growing fast so people knew that. Plus, in those days Germany needed workers. Men who were willing to work on building sites, in mines, etc. Today, unemployment is much higher and industry no longer needs more "workers". Now they need highly-qualified people but a lot of people don't understand that the *Gastarbeiter* of today might have a totally different background. They are engineers and IT experts, etc. So, on the one hand, we have high unemployment and, on the other, we need the new *Gastarbeiter*. That leads to a lot of frustration since a lot of people think that the government should make sure that the people who live in Germany get work but industry is clearly looking for qualified people. So basically there is less need for people who don't have high qualifications but those are the ones who are unemployed. That is a dilemma the government needs to face and find solutions.

1. This word means "guest worker" and refers to migrant workers who had moved to West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, seeking work as a part of a formal guest worker programme.

S.D.: You were born in Dortmund in a Turkish family. What is your relationship with Turkey today?

Y.S.: Unfortunately, I hardly see my family in Turkey anymore. I wish I could see them more often and know more about Turkey. But people also forget that it needs a lot of time to be really up to date in two cultures. I hardly manage to be up to date with politics and culture in Germany. I love my roots and they are a strong part of my identity but I also have to say honestly that the centre of my life is Germany.

S.D.: Germany has had a national integration plan since 2005 and it defines itself as a country that welcomes immigrants. What is your opinion regarding the intercultural policies in Germany?

Y.S.: Well, that is of course easy to say but the reality is different. A Turkish person in Germany still can't have both passports. As long as the German government still forces immigrants to choose between their two cultures they haven't understood much. It's like asking a child to choose between their mother and father. That isn't right. Every human being should have the right to have both passports and both identities.

S.D.: In Germany, there are great creators of Turkish origin, such as Fatih Akin and Emine Sevgi Özdamar. How do you see this process of intercultural creativity?

Y.S.: I think that it is a good and a healthy process. It just shows that now people with a Turkish migration background are moving on, becoming more a part of all sections of society.

S.D.: Do you think creativity can play an important role in the integration process?

Y.S.: I think that creativity is playing an important role in every part and process of life. But it's no more important than other areas. For example, does a Turkish lawyer do more or less for a society than a famous footballer like Mesut Özil? One is just more in the media and that of course has an impact on the society. Celebrities are in the media and of course thereby influence a certain image but that's why one has to be careful not to forget that there are so many other people who do a good job everyday by being a doctor, kebab seller, DJ or whatever. We need to recognize the small heroes more.

S.D.: Home is often a thing of the heart and mind. Just as reality is subjective, so is home. Where is your home?

Y.S.: I think that your question pretty much gives away the answer. For me, my home is where my family and friends are, and that is Germany.

S.D.: What is the role of a filmmaker these days?

Y.S.: First of all, it is making good movies. I know that sounds a bit banal but making a good movie takes a lot, because it means that you should know what came before and repeating what others have done before isn't necessarily going to make a good movie. It's more likely to be the other way round. You need to reflect on life and ask yourself why an audience should make the effort to leave the house and pay quite a bit of money to sit in a dark room full of other people. You have to know that in this dark cinema the audience have to feel a connection between them and the people on the screen. In the best of times, they fall in love with the characters on screen and their adventures.