An interview with Philippe Lioret, director of Welcome

Richard Phillips
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French filmmaker Philippe Lioret spoke with the World Socialist Web Site *during a visit to Australia last month. Lioret, 54, who began working in cinema as a sound mixer and script editor in the early 1980s, directed his first feature*—Lost in Transit (Tombés du ciel)—*in 1993.* Welcome*, his latest film, is currently screening in Australia, with a limited US release in the next few weeks. The movie explores the human impact of increasingly repressive French immigration laws on undocumented refugees and French citizens. (See:* "Welcome from France: A compassionate exposure of anti-immigrant measures")

Richard Phillips: There have been quite a few movies made about the plight of undocumented immigrants in recent years. What in particular did you want to examine and why?

PL: The theme of my film is immigrants, but its subject is the drama between two couples. I wanted to explore this theme through the real life of people—those like you or me—who generally don't know much about the problems of undocumented refugees and how, when confronted with the issue, it changes their lives.

Welcome is made of two love stories, but with complications because the two love stories crash against the walls of this strange and illogical world order. Without these two love stories I wouldn't have had a movie but a documentary about immigrants. I've seen many of these documentaries—and they have all been very good—but unfortunately I don't think people are necessarily moved by them. If people are interested in my film, it's because it speaks to them emotionally.

Welcome we have Simon, a swimming instructor, who generally doesn't care about immigrants and asylum seekers. The only problem is that his ex-wife is a volunteer and she left him because she felt he was too selfish and pre-occupied with his own life. He wants to show her that he can be someone and that he can help others too. And in doing this, he is forced to discover more and more who this young guy Bilal is, and he becomes friendly with him.

RP: How did you develop the script?

PL: I spent six weeks living with immigrants and the volunteers in Calais, and after that learnt enough about these issues to write a script. I wanted a story that didn't overdramatise things, but which contained real drama.

The film really started after I knew who was going to be the main character. Bilal, for example, is a combination of two people. One I met—a 17-year-old man from Afghanistan who wanted to join his girlfriend in London—and the other, someone I'd heard about, who swam across the Channel. Nobody really knows whether he made it or not and so the film is dedicated to him.

When I discussed this combined character with my co-writer, he said that the idea was OK, but if I wanted someone swimming across the channel then I would have to have someone to teach him how to swim. We then created the swimming instructor, who is the husband of a volunteer worker amongst the immigrants. My main desire was to make a good drama, but of course while making the movie I became more and more aware of the political issues.

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RP: Were there any difficulties funding the film?

PL: No, because I think the script was good and when you have a good script, you're generally able to find the money. Not always, but usually.

RP: Could you explain L622-1, the law which prosecutes French citizens for assisting undocumented immigrants?

PL: This is a bizarre and stupid law which says that if you help illegal migrants you can be jailed for five years. When the film was released the opposition Socialist Party asked me to screen the film in the French parliament because they wanted to modify this legislation. I did so, but their efforts to change the law failed because Sarkozy has a majority. The film was then screened at the European parliament and won its Lux Prize, which I think was a political message that this law is unfair and should be changed.

RP: I understand that Eric Besson, Sarkozy's immigration minister, has introduced even harsher legislation.

PL: Yes, there's automatic detention and you can get kicked back to where you came from. If you're a 17-year-old from Afghanistan, it means that you will be sent back to a Koranic school under the Taliban or into the regular army and face death. It's so easy for politicians to say that all of the country's problems are caused by immigrants or others and that if you vote for me I'll solve the problems. It's crude populism and used to divide and rule.

Besson is incredible. He's originally from the Socialist Party and a few years ago wrote a report angrily condemning Sarkozy's immigration laws. But Besson felt the winds of change after the last election and turned his jacket towards the winners. These sorts of people are the worst, they're like de-frocked priests.

RP: You used the phrase "strange world order," could you elaborate?

PL: It's strange and so wrong that government's can simply dictate where and when people can travel. Governments talk about illegals and aliens but weren't the English aliens when they took over Australia?

If you're walking down the street and it's raining on that side and sunny on the other, naturally you'd want to cross over to get from the rain. It's obvious. Why can't people escaping war and looking for a better life be allowed to do so? The division of the world is too straight, too closed in. Maybe it's a romantic vision that people should be able travel and live where they like, but it is a vision we should have.

RP: *Welcome* has been very popular in France. How do you assess this response? Do you think it reflects a change political situation?

PL: Audiences are drawn to the love story—it's an emotional magnet—but after watching *Welcome* they also think about the real situation facing the refugees.

RP: What's been the most memorable reaction to *Welcome*?

PL: They've been many different responses. Usually when you make a good film people congratulate you and say bravo. At the end of this movie people have come up to me and said thank you. This is much better than bravo and very encouraging.

Yes, I think the response to the film does represent a shift in political thinking. I certainly hope so. My film is not the first about the plight of immigrants and I know it won't be the last. There's a new situation developing.

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