

The 72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 1

The “reality” of this year’s Berlinale and *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush*

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The 72nd Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale) began last Thursday with a declaration by festival co-head Carlo Chatrjian that the return to in-person attendance this year represented a welcome “step towards reality.”

In fact, the reality on February 10 was that, according to the German government’s Robert Koch Institute, a record number of 247,862 new coronavirus infections were reported in Germany—an increase of 11,742 compared to the previous Thursday. In addition, 238 deaths related to SARS-CoV-2 infection were registered. For some time, leading medical authorities have warned these figures are likely to be an underestimate because laboratories across the country are unable to keep up with the numbers of COVID-19 tests they are receiving each day.

By insisting on in-person attendance, the festival officialdom risks creating a mass-spreading event in the heart of the nation’s capital at a time of record infection levels and when leading epidemiologists have warned against any premature reduction of pandemic restrictions.

The Berlinale’s co-head Mariette Rissenbeek, in comments to a highly reduced press corps (press attendance at this year’s festival is down by 50 percent), was more cautious, stressing the precautions the festival was taking. At the same time, she made clear that the impetus for in-person attendance lay primarily with the government and its Minister of Culture, Claudia Roth. Indeed, Rissenbeek ended her remarks by offering her “thanks to Claudia Roth.”

In her contribution at the festival’s opening, Roth, a veteran leading member of the Green Party, who was only recently quarantined due to COVID, complained of the health restrictions in place at the festival. She went on to assert that the presence of the public at the event was an important signal for German culture. Roth ended her remarks with a slogan that could just as well have found its way into an anti-vaccination protest—“We won’t let coronavirus get us down.” Noteworthy at the 2022 festival was a dearth of films dealing with the pandemic, which has

now been raging for over two years.

Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush

A major event at this year’s Berlinale was the screening of *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush*, a serious attempt to come to grips with contemporary reality. A highlight at last year’s Berlinale was the German premiere of *The Mauritanian*. This year’s festival returned to the theme with an outstanding contribution by director Andreas Dresen, who has produced one of the most notable bodies of film work in Germany over the past two decades.

Dresen began his career in film as a student at East Germany’s DEFA in feature films, working under his mentor Günter Reisch. In a series of works made since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and German reunification (*Nightshapes*, *Grill Point*, *Summer in Berlin*, *As We Were Dreaming*, *Gundermann*), Dresen has collaborated with leading scriptwriters such as Wolfgang Kohlhaase and Laila Stieler to tackle pressing social issues and problems in both former East Germany (GDR) and the reunited Germany. Stieler, who studied with Dresen in the former GDR, wrote the script for *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush*.

The film takes the form of a diary beginning with the preparations by 19-year-old Murat Kurnaz, a Turkish citizen but born and raised in Bremen, Germany, to travel to Pakistan in December 2001. Kurnaz has a fiancée in Turkey and before their marriage plans to attend a Koran school in Pakistan to reinforce his religious beliefs. As part of their preparations for war against Afghanistan, the US offered bounties for the surrender of terror suspects in Pakistan. Murat Kurnaz was subsequently arrested in Pakistan and handed over by the police to US forces in Afghanistan in exchange for \$3,000. Entirely innocent of any links to Al

Qaeda, Kurnaz was essentially “sold” to the Americans.

By January 2002, the German government, at that time a coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens, was already informed that Kurnaz was in the custody of US forces who dispatched the young man to Camp X-ray at Guantanamo a few weeks later. He was held in captivity and brutally tortured and abused at the notorious camp for a period of five years. Day One in the film diary gives way to Day Two, then Day 120, 248, 572, 782, etc. etc.—milestones in a seemingly unending struggle by Murat’s mother Rabiye, a working class housewife, to free her son.

Rabiye approaches human rights lawyer Bernhard Docke who is shocked to learn that a German resident is sitting in a US prison camp and takes the case. We experience the events through the eyes of Murat’s mother and her lawyer, two ordinary citizens facing a Goliath, the combined power of the US, Germany and Turkey (the Turkish state also refused to assist Murat, although he possessed Turkish citizenship). During the course of *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush*, we learn that in the autumn of 2002 three officials from Germany’s domestic and foreign intelligence agencies interrogated Kurnaz in Guantanamo and confirmed he was innocent of any form of terrorism.

The US was prepared to release Kurnaz, but his return to Germany was rejected by the chancellor’s office run by Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) and the country’s security agencies. Instead, officials acting on behalf of the government initiated proceedings to revoke Kurnaz’s right of residence to prevent his return to Germany. They argued that Kurnaz had been outside Germany for more than six months—due to his illegal imprisonment and torture in Guantanamo!—and had failed to apply for an extension of his residency permit—an impossible task under the conditions prevailing in the prison camp.

In Dresen’s film, when Docke becomes aware of this fact, he tells state attorney Marc Stocker, “You mean my own Red-Green government, which I voted for, deliberately barred his return.” He then utters an expletive.

It is necessary to name names. The German foreign minister who refused to intervene on Kurnaz’s behalf was Green Party leader and former “street fighter” Joschka Fischer. His party colleague and current Culture Minister, Claudia Roth (the very same!), was the Red-Green government’s Commissioner for Human Rights for much of the time Kurnaz suffered in prison. Heading the same government’s Interior Ministry was Otto Schily (SPD). It was Schily’s department that was responsible for coordinating the activities of Germany’s secret services, thereby ensuring that Kurnaz could not return to Germany. It was also Schily who, during the same period, promoted Hans-Georg Maassen within his ministry. Maassen later

took over as head of Germany’s domestic intelligence service until his active support of far-right groups made his further employment as a government official no longer tenable. The case of Murat Kurnaz ultimately landed in the office of the German chancellor headed by Steinmeier.

To his credit, Andreas Dresen used the press conference following the premiere of *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush* to openly criticize Steinmeier for his failure to support Murat Kurnaz—just one day before Steinmeier was due to be re-elected as German president.

What could have been a dry account of the torment of Murat Kurnaz and his family is transformed into a thoroughly moving and engaging experience by the lively script and the tremendous performances of Meltem Kaptan and Alexander Scheer, who play Rabiye Kurnaz and Bernhard Docke, respectively. Murat’s real-life mother could not have hoped for a better actor to portray her intense and passionate struggle to free her son. Both Meltem and Kaptan are able to inject moments of genuine warmth and humour into their character’s bitter struggle for justice. Rabiye invariably arrives late for appointments with her lawyer and then proceeds to drive a terrified Docke in her car at breakneck speed to their next meeting.

At the end of *Rabiye Kurnaz vs. George W. Bush*, in a highly emotional scene, Rabiye and her family are reunited with Murat. Together they all drive home at night from the airport. Murat asks the family to stop the car. He wants to look up at the night sky, which he has not seen during five years of only neon light in his prison cell. Before stepping out of the car he asks his mother if it is okay if he is alone. Rabiye, who cannot stop being a mother, replies: “I understand completely. I’ll come with you.”

Dresen’s film ends by noting that, following his release from prison and his return to Germany, Murat and his family have received no compensation and not a word of apology for his treatment from the US, Turkish or British authorities. The film credits also notes that 20 years later, 39 prisoners are still being held in Guantanamo.

To be continued



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