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FILM REVIEW: Sonne und Beton

By Princess Kinoc

Sonne und Beton (Sun and Concrete) 2023 is not your ordinary teen movie – a review

There's something about *Sonne und Beton* (Sun and Concrete) that scares me. It's not just the fact that this is a story of four teenagers living in downtown Berlin, and that drugs and violence are prevalent, no. It's because we're now in 2023 and yet a film that tackles what could also be a true story for most youngsters living in the slums can still experience to this day.

Let me break this film down for you: the opening scenes and the rest of the colours of the film are in deep red orange tones that it looks like an orange juice commercial, so sunny and so appealing and yet what it really wants you to see is how gripping each scene are. So often we expect coming-of-age stories to be so uplifting and high-spirited that it is rare to see a film that depicts the realities of living in an impoverished setting with such wildly colourful cinematography. Perhaps that is exactly the point, this is the youth of Berlin we're talking about, and the filmmakers want your attention full-time.

Lukas (Levy Rico Arcos) skips school for the nth time this week as the school security stops him from entering the premises for not having his ID. He has pondered where he left this. He's your typical skinny kid, secretly talented and has a penchant for writing. But in this tough neighborhood, academic opportunities are scarce as the violence in the streets forces you to be rougher and tougher than becoming book smart. He meets up with his childhood friends Gino (Rafael Luis Klein-Hessling) and Julius (Vincent Weimer) and they both ask him to help them buy weed from Cem (rapper Lucio 101, real name Lucas Rother) but for some reason they wind up getting in a brawl with the Arabs in the park. Lukas ends up owing them 500 euros and he must pay back otherwise all hell would break loose. This sets them off on a summer adventure like no other, and it's not the most fun adventure one would even dream about.

Neukölln is a borough located in the Southern part of Berlin. It's a neighborhood filled with diverse Middle Eastern communities, but it is also one of the poorest regions in Germany with weak social infrastructure. You can feel this description throughout the entire film, not only with its youngsters but even with the adults living here. When Lukas, Gino, and Julius meet newcomer Sanchez (Aaron Maldonado-Morales), he has a similarly impoverished childhood, but his morals are intact thanks to his caring mother, perhaps because they've both lived in different places and

rely on each other. Whereas the three have never experienced love and care in their households, which is probably why they resort to drugs and violence most of the time as this is what they've only seen most of their lives: in school where the students never respect their teachers, at home where their parents are just as confused as they are.

The film is gripping from start to finish and the ensemble cast of youngsters take us on a wild ride where they question the adults' morals and how they finally build their own and successfully wish they could get out of there as quickly as possible. The brilliance of this script and story by Lobrecht and Wnendt makes it the perfect summer film peppered with the harsh realities of a dog-eat-dog world. I can't stress enough how the cinematography and images captured by their DOP, Yi Jieun has perfectly captured the hip and cool visuals of Gropiusstadt yet he is also unabashed when he shows us grittier side of this locality. The individual performances of newcomers (yes these are all their first films) Arcos, Klein-Hessling, Weimer, and Maldonado-Morales are remarkable. It makes you empathize with them and wish them a better future.

Sonne und Beton is not a film that offers answers or neatly tied conclusions. Despite the perkiness of its cinematography, it is a mirror held up to a harsh reality, challenging us to confront the complexities of youth in the face of adversity, and that maybe they really shouldn't be experiencing this if only we had made better choice for ourselves. This is cinema at its finest, a potent reminder that sometimes the most powerful stories are the ones that hit closest to home.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Princess Kinoc is a freelance writer, and the current Editor-in-Chief for Film Police Reviews. She is also a member of the Society of Filipino Film Reviewers (SFFR) and the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SoFIA). Outside FPR, she has also written reviews and essays for New Durian Cinema and Pelikula Journal, and she co-hosts the Filipino film podcast, Third World Cinema Club. She is a black coffee drinker, and she's not so sure if that matters.