



a film by **FLORIAN HEINZEN-ZIOB**

GERMAN CLASS

every beginning is hard



A POLYPHEM FILMPRODUCTION FUNDED BY FILM- UND MEDIENSTIFTUNG NRW · KUNSTSTIFTUNG NRW
 MINISTERIUM FÜR KULTUR UND WISSENSCHAFT DES LANDES NRW CINEMATOGRAPHER ENNO ENDLICHER SOUND RECORDING JONATHAN KASTL, ARMIN
 BADDE MUSIC VASYL HUMNYTSKY SOUNDDESIGN TIM ELZER SOUND MIXING KARL ATTELN PRODUCTION FLORIAN HEINZEN-ZIOB & GEORG HEINZEN
 WRITER, EDITOR, DIRECTOR FLORIAN HEINZEN-ZIOB



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CONTENT

GERMAN CLASS takes us back to school. Over the course of six months the film closely follows class teacher Ute Vecchio as she prepares children who have just arrived from other countries for the German school system. Small successes, large set-backs, school pranks and the looming threat of deportation – the challenges the children face are just as diverse as the countries and cultures they originate from. The ambitious Pranvera, who even beats the boys in arm wrestles, has to suffer the deportation of her best friend. Ferdi, who dreams of working as a car mechanic, only has four months left to catch up on four years' worth of schoolwork. And class clown Kujtim has already managed to learn four languages in his eventful lifetime, but cannot write any of them.

GERMAN CLASS is a touching portrait of learning, adapting and growing in a new language and in a new society. A fresh look at an institution that we think we all know well – school.



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TECHNICAL DATA

Original title:	Klasse Deutsch
English title:	German Class
Genre:	Documentary
Country of production:	Germany
Year of production:	2018
Length:	89 min.
Picture:	2K FLAT (1,85:1)
Audio:	Dolby Digital 5.1 / Stereo
Screening formats:	digital (DCP, Blu-ray, DVD)
Language:	German with english subtitles

PROTAGONISTS

Ute Vecchio, Kujtim, Ferdi, Schach, Pranvera

CREW

Writer & Director:	Florian Heinzen-Ziob
Production:	polyphem Filmproduktion GbR Florian Heinzen-Ziob & Georg Heinzen
Cinematographer:	Enno Endlicher
Editor:	Florian Heinzen-Ziob
Sound Recording:	Jonathan Kastl & Armin Badde
Music:	Vasyl Humnytskyy
Sounddesign:	Tim Elzer
Sound Mixing:	Karl Atteln
Funding:	Film- und Medienstiftung NRW Kunststiftung NRW Ministerium für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Landes NRW Germanfilms
Sponsors:	Toshiba Corporation STEAM Architekten



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SYNOPSIS

SHORT

GERMAN CLASS takes us back to school. Over the course of six months the film closely follows the daily ups and downs of a group of children from abroad as they take their first steps in the German school system.

MEDIUM

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LONG

GERMAN CLASS takes us back to school. Over the course of six months the film closely follows class teacher Ute Vecchio as she prepares children who have just arrived from other countries for the German school system. Small successes, large set-backs, school pranks and the looming threat of deportation – the challenges the children face are just as diverse as the countries and cultures they originate from. The ambitious Pranvera, who even beats the boys in arm wrestles, has to suffer the deportation of her best friend. Ferdi, who dreams of working as a car mechanic, only has four months left to catch up on four years' worth of schoolwork. And class clown Kujtim has already managed to learn four languages in his eventful lifetime, but cannot write any of them.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES

During a short film project about “money and debts” with pupils at Cologne’s Henry Ford secondary school, I spotted a strange lesson plan on a board: “Monday to Friday – 5 x German”. Nothing but German. I wondered who had devised such a sadistic lesson plan. Then I came across Ute Vecchio and her preparation class, or “VK”.

The VK is the first port of call for children who have arrived in Germany from a foreign country. Here they are integrated into the German school system in no more than two years. Each pupil arrives with a very different level of knowledge. Some pupils attended elite schools in their homelands and simply laugh at the level they discover upon their arrival at VK. Others have yet to learn to read and write in their short, eventful lives. These differing levels of knowledge make it difficult for the teacher to plan a language class that works for everyone. This is why Ute Vecchio has decided to work with each pupil individually where possible.

When I first attended the VK class, I was immediately amazed by the enthusiasm and energy with which children from all over the world grapple with the German language. What’s the difference between “finden” (to find) and “erfinden” (to invent)? How do you conjugate the verb “bitten” (to ask)? And I soon realised the teacher’s role here is something way bigger than someone who simply drums grammar into her pupils. She is the pupils’ go-to person if they are homesick or are at risk of being deported. She represents academic discipline but also protects the children from their overly ambitious parents. She can explain and facets of the German legal system and also how to use a dictionary. You could say Ute Vecchio is the first part of Germany the children get to know. And I was hugely impressed by the great job she is doing.

I knew right away that I wanted to shoot a film about this extraordinary school class. I didn’t want this to be yet another concerned look at the refugee situation. I wanted it to be an emotional, gritty and also humorous film about the courage, energy and passion that young immigrants display when trying to settle in Germany. I was therefore extremely fortunate that class teacher Ute Vecchio and also the film’s protagonists – twelve-year-old Pranvera from Albania, 13-year-old Schach from Kyrgyzstan, 13-year-old Kujtim from Kosovo and 15-year-old Ferdi, also from Kosovo – really opened up when on camera.

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“German Class” looks at what is currently a widely discussed and controversial topic in Germany. Refugee numbers and border closures are frequently debated in politics. Populist parties have seen a surge in popularity born out of fears of a supposed infiltration of foreigners. For me as a filmmaker, I knew I wanted to remove the film from this everyday context. Unlike a news report or current affairs programme, a cinema film needs – in my opinion – to have a timeless, universal element to it.

I developed strategies to set the film apart from those same images and stories that we see in the news on a daily basis. I didn’t want any images of overcrowded refugees shelters or scenes shot in the so-called “problem districts”. Instead I decided to focus on a place we all know well – school. Then reducing that to a single room – pretty much the entire film plays out in the VK classroom – was the biggest decision of all. We learn about the pupils, about where they’re from, their family situations, their problems, but only what they talk about in class. The protagonists are never portrayed as people in need of our help, they are active participants. They learn, avoid learning, fail and struggle through. We’re not looking down on the pupils, we’re there in the same place as them and on equal terms, we’re not emphasising the protagonists’ foreignness or “exoticness”, we look at what connects us and the familiarities we share. This is what made “German Class” into a universal film about childhood and learning.

Even the decision to shoot the film in black and white was designed to remove it from its time and to make it easier for the viewers to associate it with their own time at school. A classroom is also a busy place in a visual sense: the red chairs compete for the viewer’s visual attention with the multi-coloured books that lie on the tables, the colourful posters on the walls and the children’s T-shirts. Your eyes get no rest whatsoever and the protagonists, who are supposed to be the focus of the film, get lost in a whirl of colours. Losing the colour brought the children back to the centre of the picture and lent the narrative something of an archetypal feel.

With these considerations in mind, I got to work. I shot the goings-on in the VK on a regular basis over a period of six months. We arrived for the first class in the morning and stayed right through until the end of fifth class. That helped us to establish a close relationship with the pupils and the teacher. Our film crew of three became part of the class. The long shots – sometimes as long as 30 minutes – allowed us to capture the authentic learning environment without disrupting it. I also did two film courses with the children to give them the chance to experience what it’s like to be on the other side of the camera. The children gradually got used to the camera. We became invisible and – without really noticing it happen – became part of the class. We ourselves were back at school.

“German Class” is now complete. Ute Vecchio is still teaching her VK class, with new children from all over the world. The children in my film either made it to secondary school proper, got kicked out of school altogether, or got deported. They all face an uncertain future. In spite of their respective situations, I still think the time they spent in the VK will stand them in good stead for their onward journeys. Above all, their teacher Ute Vecchio, who showed them discipline and affection in equal measure, will always remain a role model for them in tackling life’s many challenges.

What did I learn at the VK? To see my own time at school from a new perspective. Not – as I did then – as a torturous waste of time, where the clocks ran backwards. No, I now understand what a real privilege it is to be able to go to school.



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BIOGRAPHY Florian Heinzen-Ziob

Born 1984 in Düsseldorf, Germany. After leaving school, he worked at the Düsseldorf theatre as assistant director and as an editor and animator in Hamburg.

2006 – 2012 he studied media arts and film direction at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne, where he wrote and directed a range of feature and animated films and documentaries.

2012 – 2018 he produced and directed two feature-length documentary films “Original Copy” (2015) and “German Class” (2018). His films were screened at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, Hot Docs Toronto and the Sheffield Doc/Fest. Meanwhile he founded his own production company “polyphem”.

Florian Heinzen-Ziob lives and works in Cologne, Germany.



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FILMOGRAPHY

GERMAN CLASS / documentary film / concept, editor, director and producer / 2018

FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY / shortfilm / screenplay, editor, director and producer / 2016

ORIGINAL COPY / documentary film / concept, editor, director and producer / 2015

TOMO / shortfilm / screenplay, editor, director / 2013

GROWTH / shortfilm / screenplay, editor, director / 2011

KONSERWACJA / shortfilm / concept, editor, director / 2008



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