

Percy Adlon – Letter to a student

*Excerpt of a letter to a German film student who needed some answers to some questions.*

I never forced my filmmaking, but made the necessary decisions step-by-step when they were needed—a beautiful and exciting and not always successful procedure. Style was always very important to me. A lead color for an entire film. A sparse environment. A limited space. One song. No real score. Just the separate instrumental tracks of the song. A lot of original sounds. Not too much dialogue. No violence. Praise of woman. A mood between tears and laughter. Others later called it my “poetic realism”. Light and color, motion and calm, emotion, surprise, hope, joy, being touched, fulfillment, images that don’t have to be explained. This is what’s important for my films. Some conflict, some suspense. But just very carefully used like some spice that should never overpower the more subtle flavors.

Film for me always was something that feeds itself from other art forms, but is totally unique, distinguished. Dialogue is not the deciding factor, but the unspoken. I’ve worked in America since 1987. Why? Because I lived for over 50 years in my homeland, and I wanted to live and work somewhere else. I came here and stayed—like Jasmin from *Bagdad Café*. Walked away, stayed.

Without the worldwide success of *Bagdad*, though, this would not have been possible. Why do I work in English now, and not in German? Films in English automatically have a larger audience. That my films still deal with German subjects has to do with us—my wife, my son, and I—being German. A German family, with German education, background, experiences, schooling, history, memories, and conscience. This is the world we know. Writers should write about something they are experts in. We are experts in German American Coffee—just kidding.

You are wondering if my choice of the word “Bagdad” has anything to do with Iraq. No. We made a trip to the Mojave Desert, California, and on a regional map we discovered the name “Bagdad”. Just for fun, we looked for it. But we didn’t find it. Like so many things in America, it didn’t last. The few buildings it had consisted of were torn down. At a coffee break in one of the cafes on route 66—I think it was in Ludlow—Saskia, Felix, Eleonore, and I invented a little story for the no-longer-existing town of Bagdad, a coffee shop story between a black owner and a Bavarian tourist. They are so different, attracted and scared at the same time, and finally become friends.

My stories are like fantasies, or dreams of life. Therefore my colors don't try to match real life but are filtered through the sieve of memory. For instance, we made the desert in *Bagdad Café* golden like in a painting of Salvador Dali, while in reality the desert is mostly gray. In my film, the gold became the lead color. A symbol for warmth. For the possibility of warmth among people. A symbol of friendship.

There is much more to tell...