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Sibel Kekilli's New Reality

By RHEA WESSEL

Just when actress Sibel Kekilli thought she had been accepted for who she is—a talented German actress—she is being asked once again to explain the norms and behavior of Turkish-German immigrant families.



Sibel Kekilli

Nela Koenig/Roba Press

Born in Heilbronn to working-class parents who emigrated from Turkey, the 30-year-old actress is often annoyed by Germany's focus on her immigrant roots. Yet interviews frequently turn to the subject after Ms. Kekilli's latest film, which tells the story of a young Turkish-German victim threatened by her family.

But with the film "When We Leave," due to open in the U.S. later this month and its nomination as Germany's entry for the Oscars, Ms. Kekilli will once again become an ambassador of Germany's Turkish culture—this time to American audiences. The film opened in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Turkey last year, and will open in more European countries this year. She will find herself telling a story relived often in real lives: how the children of Germany's immigrants fight for acceptance within their families, while never quite obtaining it among their German peers. It is a story that has shaped Ms. Kekilli's own life, even though she skated around the issue during our recent discussion at the Atlantic Hotel in Hamburg on a freezing day.

"When We Leave," the debut film by Viennese director Feo Aladag, won several international cinema awards last year, including "Best Actress" titles for Ms. Kekilli from the German Film Academy and at the Tribeca Film Festival. The film tells the

story of a young woman who is threatened by her family because they disagree with her lifestyle. The tension leads to a senseless and emotionally wrenching crime at the hands of a family member—a so-called honor killing.

The drama is Ms. Kekilli's second big success after her breakthrough with a lead role in the film "Head-On." That film, by Fatih Akin, won international acclaim and tells the story of a rebellious young Turkish German who enters into a sham marriage to free herself from her family's constraints, but then falls in love with her husband after all.

Both films touch on the universal human need to belong, a topic that seems to pursue Ms. Kekilli (or the other way around). It is present in the roles she accepts: her volunteer work for women's rights organization Terre des

Femmes; her efforts to be taken seriously as a German film star; and the strained relationship with her family, which was widely reported in the German media.

Film historians trace the theme of immigrant belonging in German cinema back to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Fear Eats the Soul" ("Angst essen Seele auf"), released in 1974. The film focused on a guest worker's struggle with prejudice and his life in between two cultures. By the end of the 1980s, critics say a self-confident cinema of "migration" had taken root. Mr. Akin and Ms. Kekilli are widely credited with helping Turkish-German directors finally break into the German mainstream with "Head-On," released in 2004.

Between "Head-On" and "When We Leave," Ms. Kekilli kept busy: She fought and won a battle with a German tabloid over what she called its "smear campaign" related to her brief stint in pornography, she underwent rhinoplasty and she played film roles as an Italian, a Kurd and a Jew, among others. But her reaction to winning the Lola award from the German Film Academy last year revealed that she had indeed felt ignored or boxed into roles reserved for foreigners.

When the announcer said she had won the award, Ms. Kekilli launched into a lengthy appeal for directors to invite her to more castings. Apparently, they took heed. A few months later, Ms. Kekilli began a role in the iconic German television crime series "Tatort" and was cast in HBO's upcoming "Game of Thrones." Both roles have nothing to do with Turkishness.



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Florian Lukas and Ms. Kekilli in 'When We Leave.'

Sipping jasmine tea near the fireplace at the hotel, Ms. Kekilli said, "If you move to Canada, after a few years you call yourself Canadian. In Germany, it's difficult to belong." She added, "Sooner or later, directors in Germany will start casting without regard to where a person is from. It shouldn't matter anymore."

"When We Leave," which won Best Narrative Feature at Tribeca, has parallels to the true-life case of Hatun Sürücü, a Turkish-German victim of honor killing whose story is familiar to German audiences. The director, Ms. Aladag, said she was surprised to learn that viewers in some parts of the U.S. had little knowledge of honor crimes in Europe. Given the blank canvas of perception in the U.S., critics have voiced concerns that the film

could reinforce stereotypes about Muslim communities in Germany because it depicts Turkish culture as "alien." Katherine Ewing, a professor and the author of "Stolen Honor," a book about the stigmatization of Turks in Germany, said the film could stimulate "rescue fantasies" and "moral outrage" in ways that could make it popular in the U.S.

The reason for the killing in the film was already misinterpreted at Tribeca; Ms. Aladag says she wanted to show how "patriarchal" and backward thinking—and not religion—led to the murder. Indeed, the film barely touches on Islam. But at the awards ceremony, the announcer described the film as one about a woman breaking away from "Muslim" traditions.

Ms. Aladag said her goal was to create an authentic and nuanced picture of a conflicted family. "I don't like films that explain everything. I'm not doing a schoolbook. I am making a film that evokes emotions. No one will be able to understand these crimes if you don't talk about human beings," she said.

Although Ms. Aladag hadn't originally considered Ms. Kekilli for the lead in the film, the two came to agreement quickly after discussing the project. Ms. Kekilli said, "I already started crying while reading the screenplay. Everything happened right before my eyes."

Ms. Kekilli says she has never dreamt of winning an Oscar, but she would be proud to bring home the prize for her country. Germany's last two Oscar triumphs were "The Lives of Others" in 2006 and "Nowhere in Africa" in 2002. The shortlist of films that will compete for the 83rd Academy Awards will be released at the end of January. Ms. Kekilli hasn't yet made plans to attend, but she is keeping the slot open in her calendar.