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Danube Hospital (Donauspital): FIDMarseille Review

5:03 PM PDT 7/25/2012 by Neil Young

The Bottom Line

Illuminating, occasionally wince-inducing documentary assembled with quietly competent professionalism.

Director-Screenwriter-Director of photography

Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Nikolaus Geyrhalter's Austrian documentary is a level-by-level study of a large Vienna medical facility.

MARSEILLE - A quiet ode to the reassuringly dull super-efficiency of the Austrian healthcare system, **Nikolaus Geyrhalter's** *Danube Hospital (Donauspital SMZ-OST)* examines Vienna's second-biggest medical facility with a suitably 'clinical' detachment. Made for Austrian television, this unfussily professional chronicle will prove a popular pick for non-fiction festivals and networks without attaining the impact and exposure of Geyrhalter's 2005 breakthrough *Our Daily Bread*, which explored industrial food-production practices.

And while the premises of multi-national conglomerates are off-limits for most, nearly all residents of developed countries will require the services of - and most likely pay multiple visits to - such hospitals over the course of their lives. Geyrhalter's cameras record both semi-public areas and zones beyond our usual purview, such as the 'transporter corridor' on level two where dozens of low-lying robot-like vehicles silently glide in Kubrickian splendor.

In scenes that span the proverbial cradle (neo-natal unit) to the grave (morgue) - with locations identified by on-screen captions - Geyrhalter's tripod-mounted, impeccably-framed images capture the interactions of human and machine that have come to define the hospital experience in the 21st century. The roof supports a landing-pad for helicopters; keyhole surgery is conducted with the aid of tiny video-devices; fragile newborns are encased in elaborate life-supporting contraptions; a lancet-type instrument expertly enters an eyeball.

The latter is just the first of several toe-curling - at times stomach-churning - sequences, the ickiest of which involve the pathology department. Many of a sensitive disposition will squirm at the manual post-mortem analysis of intestines and organs, and at the slicing of a brain - freshly extracted from a skull-sliced cadaver - like so much soggy gray meatloaf.

Geyrhalter and his editor **Andrea Wagner** keep such explicit displays mercifully brief, and the inclusion of such traumatic episodes is justified as they form an important part of the hospital's daily work - although presumably for reasons of practicality and safety (and perhaps to avoid comparisons with television dramas) there's not much ER 'action'. Indeed, this is a film which spends as much time in the (semi-automated) canteen as in the operating-theater, where surgeons chat in hushed tones about unrelated topics in drily amusing fashion.

And while the overall tone is serious and often sombre, humor is seldom very far from the equation in *Danube Hospital* - as when we see the scene-stealing little transporter-bots undergo surgery-type repairs. Even the 'darker' sequences can raise a smile: an elderly lady being administered a form of last rites tetchily asks the clerics to go about their business at a brisker clip. She'd undoubtedly approve of Geyrhalter and Wagner's preference for short scenes and their overall economy in a film which packs considerable thematic range into its 75 minutes.

Venue: FIDMarseille Film Festival

Production company: NGF, in coproduction with Arte and ORF

Director / Screenwriter / Director of photography: Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Producers: Markus Glaser, Michael Kitzberger, Wolfgang Widerhofer, Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Editor: Andrea Wagner

Sales Agent: Outlook, Vienna

No rating, 75 minutes.