

'Schultze' an inspiring look at life after work

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There's a question every aging athlete asks himself which hides a more serious one: Is there life after sports? The hidden query is: Does my life now — in fact, did my life when I was active — have meaning?

That question is the impetus for German director Michael Schorr's first film "Schultze Gets The Blues," a quiet but deadly serious comedy where the question is changed to, "Is there life after work?"

Schultze is one of three friends given early retirement after a lifetime of work in the salt mines of Eastern Germany. What do he and his friends do now? Their life has been habitual, unchanging from day to day and year to year. Schultze's friends are married, so part of their answer, whether they like it or not, is circumscribed by their families.

But Schultze is single. He is a fat, amiable, reticent man who has asked nothing of the world and, it is suggested, is following the same existence as his father before him. Even among his friends, he is the most pliable and least demanding.

His one unique trait is that he is an accordion player, and even there he plays only the traditional polkas he learned from his father.

Then one night, Schultze hears zydeco music on the radio and is intrigued. He takes out his accordion and practices the song again and again, day after day, becoming more and more obsessed with the life as well as the music of far-off, exotic American Louisiana.

Thus begins Schultze's life after work as he plans and then goes on an existential odyssey that may seem mundane but is every bit as heroic as Odysseus's undertaking in "The Odyssey" and Aeneas's in "The Aeneid." As unlikely as it seems, Schultze is in search of his destiny, and thus becomes a lovable Everyman who we can follow on adventures that, we come to realize, are our own.

Adventures? Well, maybe that's not quite the right word. Zydeco music and an exotic journey? Not quite. We go to films full of expectations not only about what will happen in them but how the story will be presented to us. "Schultze Gets The Blues" destroys those expectations, and there's nothing for the viewer to do but sit back without preconceptions and let the quirky comedy take him on its offbeat expedition into the unknown.

Writer-director Schorr has chosen to tell his tale in a series of scenes that contain little dialogue. Most of them are single shots taken with a stationary, objective camera that every once in a while pans left or right. The effect is like looking at a series of snapshots in a photo album, where more is going on than meets the iris at first glance. In other words, look closely at each scene, since the film is predominantly visual and each scene is full of implications and sly innuendoes.



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Two sequences illustrate the method. In the first sequence Schultze, without preamble or explanation, is shown shoveling coal into a furnace. These shots alternate with visits to a travel agency that advertises package fares to Louisiana. The viewer is to infer from these shots that Schultze has taken a job to earn ticket money for a trip to Louisiana.

The second sequence is a series of shots that recur throughout the film. The shots, again taken with a stationary camera, are of a flat, empty landscape that is more sky than land and on which sits a windmill. Every now and then a human being or two crosses this landscape as if they were characters crossing a stage. I don't think I need be more explicit about the implications here, except to point out that the windmill, which slowly revolves every now and then, becomes a symbol of the inexorable movement of time.

There are many other sequences that work in the above manner, but I don't want to spoil the plot of this intriguing little film. What should be mentioned, however, are the dangers of the method, which are: 1. One's interpretation of the many inferences can lead the viewer to wrong conclusions in the simplest instances; 2. The director can present more shots than are needed.

Certainly in the case of "Schultze," the viewer understands all he needs to know about Schultze's character and life in Germany in the first half-hour, and the film would have profited from having 15 minutes of the 114 minute running time cut from that part of the film.

But this is quibbling with a motion picture that is as unobtrusively profound as it is charming and says, unequivocally, that, yes, there is life after work.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27, every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. His history of film, "Movie Milestones," can be seen Tuesdays and Fridays at 7:30 p.m. on channel 26 (Santa Cruz) and channel 72 (Watsonville).

WHAT: 'Schultze Gets the Blues.'

RATING: PG: Mild profanity (In German with English subtitles).

WHERE: The Nickelodeon, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 54 minutes.

VERDICT: A-.

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