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Spoiler warning! Skip the fourth paragraph if you prefer not to know one of the family secrets.

The view may be pretty but life is hard in the Austrian documentary *Bellavista*, about a mother and daughter who run the titular hotel in a mountainous Italian village. They are among the few last speakers of a local East-Tyrol dialect, something that even further isolates them from the others. Austrian director Peter Schreiner collaborated with Giuliana Pachner on the story of her life and that of her mother and village. At almost two hours, the black and white film -- whose contents includes family secrets and religious imagery as well as scenes from everyday life -- is unlikely to play far and wide, but the screening attended at the International Film Festival Rotterdam did not have an empty seat in the sizeable venue for *Bellavista*'s entire duration.

The film opens with a shot of Giuliana at her favourite spot in the mountains, where she comes to think, sleep and just be herself. "It is here that the realisation took hold of being different," she says. The tone, more that of a written voice-over than a spontaneous realisation, is typical of the film that features many women speaking directly to camera as they go about their daily chores. It is either an indication of how these women's thinking has crystallised into clear ideas over time, or how Pachner, in her collaboration with the director, has carefully prepared every shot.

*Bellavista* revels in the majestic exteriors of the Alps, the painterly interiors of the homes in the village and the weathered and lived-in faces of the women (some in extreme close-up), with the wonderfully detailed black and white photography courtesy of the director lending many of the images the air of postcards from a bygone era. Giuliana herself is an accomplished photographer as well, and in her own work as in the documentary, she seems to want to own each moment and even make it last beyond her own time.

As the film progresses and we get to know Giuliana, her mother and the villagers better, it becomes clear that the family has suffered quite a few tragedies in and around the hotel. These revelations feel a bit scripted rather than arising naturally out of the conversations between the women and the director (who is heard but remains offscreen). Two of her brothers are on the local cemetery, a place where Giuliana hardly finds any peace herself. A few facial scars also indicate that she has lived through quite a few disasters of her own making, though her the material is handled delicately and in an appropriately understated manner: Giuliana is shown looking at a picture of her younger self with the scars on her face, and says: "This must have been when I had already decided to live".

Sitting through *Bellavista*'s two hours filled with religious imagery and stately conversation could make some feel like they are doing penance, but like the recent German documentary *Die grosse Stille* (Into Great Silence) or the first 100 pages of Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, it is worthwhile experience for those with an interest in the subject.

This film was screened as part of the 2007 International Film Festival Rotterdam.