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## 'The Divine Order' offers unique look at a moment in history

By Sophie Braccini



Photo provided

Petra Volpe, a Swiss film director living in Berlin and New York, knew when she created the film "The Divine Order" about the Swiss women's freedom movement in the 1970s that it would resonate with people today. The story starts in a

small rural part of this lovely country, set in its stubborn ways, and shows the transformation of an ordinary woman into a political activist. Going from the very local to the universal, this unique film, full of humor, tenderness, drama and emotion,

reminds us of the battle previous generations of women fought, and that as far as sexism is concerned, nothing can ever be taken for granted.

"The Divine Order" is the first movie made about a woman's right to vote at the federal level in Switzerland, which was the second to last country in Western Europe to grant that right to women (Portugal was last in 1976). The moving film is set almost entirely in a small agricultural and very patriarchal German-speaking Switzerland, where Nora is an ordinary housewife raising two young boys and serving a husband and a father-in-law. The young mother is not particularly interested in politics; she is simply bored with her repetitive domestic life and wants to get a part-time job. When she realizes that her husband can, by law, forbid her from getting a job that would take her out of her routine, her political awareness starts to grow and she is moved to action.

Volpe explained in the Swiss newspaper Le Temps that her objective with this movie was to find, in local events, what can resonate with the universal human experience. She believes that there are people everywhere who become politicized when they realize, like Nora in the movie, that the actions taken by decision makers impact their own everyday lives. Part of the charm of the movie is seeing how this humble person finds in herself the courage to take her own destiny in her hands, whatever the cost.

Volpe's film is also an historical tale, created after the director studied historical documents collected by feminist militant Marthe Gosteli. The woman who died last year at age 99 gave her access to brochures, articles, flyers, academic papers and photographs, illustrating the difficult battle Swiss women had to fight to have access to the political arena. Volpe does not hide the role that some women played

in the undercutting of the liberation movement. "Women are not necessarily better human beings than men," commented Volpe. "Some educated women already had an advantageous status and did not want to share, others were concerned that if they started to be political it would undermine their position inside the family."

All these women are represented in the movie: the courageous ones, the humble ones, the privileged, the frightened ones, and in the middle of it all, a few hippies talking about the sexual revolution.

The adventure of Nora, her growth as an independent thinker and then as a leader, is painted with a lot of humanity and keen understanding. Marie Leuenberger as Nora portrays the transformation with tact and finesse. The role got Leuenberger the 2017 Best Actress award at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. She and her partners do not look like movie stars, which is refreshing. The men featured in the movie do not have the lion's share of roles; some are brutal, others stupid, or unhappy. In the movie men are redeemed only when they submit.

There is a great love and tenderness in this movie expressed by the director for this generation of women who came before her, and fought for rights we now take for granted, and even do not always exercise. The movie also reminds us that too many women around the world are oppressed today, in their lives, in their intimacy, denied not only equal rights, but dignity as well.

The movie will represent Switzerland at the Oscar competition. As it did last year, the International Film Showcase brings high caliber foreign films to Orinda once a month. "The Divine Order" will be presented at the Orinda Theatre for at least one week starting Jan. 5. For showtimes and information, visit Lamorindatheatres.com.

## Families Without Borders trains future civic leaders

By Sophie Braccini



Family Without Borders students during a recent retreat with Terri Khonsari.

Photo provided

During a fundraising luncheon in her Moraga home last September Terri Khonsari told her supporters of her coming West Africa trip to Sierra Leone to visit her nonprofit to support students and select the next group of future leaders. A few weeks ago she returned, exhausted, but with renewed determination and faith that combining scholarships with community service is a sustainable model that can have lasting societal impact.

Khonsari is proud to say that Families Without Borders is now the largest provider of higher edu-

cation scholarships in Sierra Leone – the Chinese government is second. She is also fast to point out what makes a difference with the system she created just a few years ago. "We do not just select students and give them scholarships," she explains, "we engage in a process with them where they learn to pay back by volunteering in their own country as they study."

During her trip, she personally met with the students who applied for a scholarship with her organization. Khonsari says that it is a somewhat complex process, but she wants to make sure that

the selected youth are very good students with no other means of financial aid. Their stories, which are sometimes quite emotional, impact her. "When Sahr Musa Binkoe came to the interview, he told me why he wanted to become a lawyer," she remembers. The young man needed to drop out of high school when powerful tribal leaders seized his father's land. He is now determined to become a land lawyer and become an expert at defending dispossessed farmers.

Motivation, aptitude and real needs are not the only requirements. The key for Khonsari is the

spirit of community service the students commit to even before the university school year begins. "This year we have recruited 25 new students from all over Sierra Leone, with a new emphasis on sciences," she explains. "Between next February and the beginning of the school year in the fall of 2018, they will go to villages and start teaching literacy to children and adults." The rate of adult literacy has improved over the last 10 years, according to the World Data Atlas, to 48.4 percent in 2015. It was only 34.8 percent in 2004; the youth literacy rate is 67.4 percent.

Not counting the new recruits, Khonsari says that the program now sponsors 51 students. All of them, as part of their contract with Families Without Borders, are engaged in volunteering where it is needed, such as Ibrahim, the nonprofit's first graduate who has now raised his own funds to build a school in a village. "The place he chose is not even his own village," explains Khonsari. "As part of our training sessions and retreats, we mix up ethnicities so the young people learn to know each other and empathize with all."

From this year's retreat with a visit at Banana Island, the historic slave deportation site in Sierra Leone, another project came from the students: creating their own nonprofit to eliminate childhood slavery that sadly persists in most parts of the country. Khonsari is still deeply moved by the story she heard, and comforted by the determination of these young

people who are taking on some of the challenges of their country.

After her stay in Sierra Leone, Khonsari went to speak at a philanthropy conference in Nigeria where she met people from all over the continent. She said that she got a lot of interest when people understood that what she is trying to do is support the emergence of new community-minded leaders, who will continue to grow the program themselves organically. She adds that she is not in a hurry to sign with just anybody with a big wallet for the sake of growing the program.

The cost of one year of college, including room and board is \$2,000 for one student. Right now, the nonprofit is funded almost exclusively by donations from people who attended either an annual gala or a luncheon. She and her husband, a doctor with a medical clinic in Antioch, are two of the biggest donors. Khonsari's current dream is to bring the program to other African countries, but she is aware that doing this will require a larger foundation's backing to plan and recruit. She thinks that some of the graduates of her program, showing the leadership and service spirit, will be able to take on responsibilities as the program expands.

Right now Khonsari is looking for a space for her next gala and other operational support in the U.S. to sustain her cause. To learn more about Families Without Borders, visit familieswithoutborders.org.