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

By Sophie Braccini

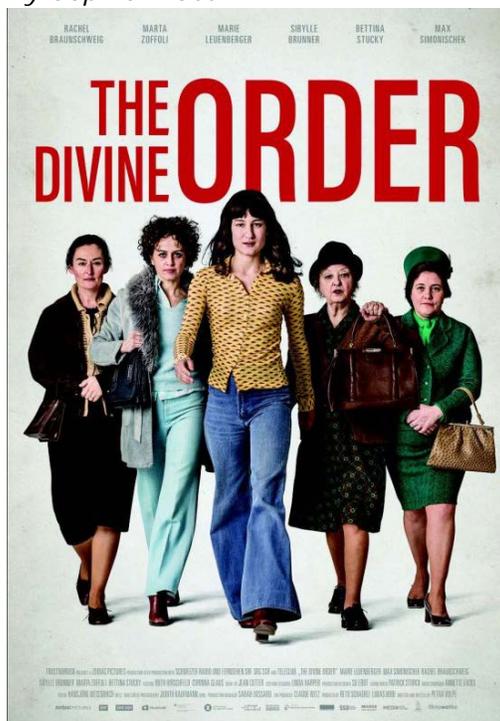


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Petra Volpe, a Swiss film director living in Berlin and New York, knew when she created the film "The Divine Order" about the Swiss women's freedom movement in the 1970s that it would resonate with people today. The story starts in a small rural part 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Volpe's film is also an historical tale, created after the director studied historical documents collected by feminist militant Marthe Gosteli.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.

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[back](#)

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