

The Divine Order

“The Divine Order” addresses some late-blooming women’s rights issues in the West: the shocking lack of suffrage among Swiss women as late as 1971. The story is told through Nora, dutiful housewife and mother, who lives with her decent husband, their two sons, and her crusty father-in-law in a small Swiss village, where there is little awareness of the burgeoning civil rights movements elsewhere in the world. “Equality of the sexes is a sin against nature,” intones one convinced character.

Nora is a reliable, modest woman who “would like to do something different,” such as taking up a part time job, but she cannot work in Switzerland without her husband’s permission, with women’s second class status seen as part of the “divine order” of things. Her frustration runs up against a couple of activists advocating for the women’s franchise in a national referendum, and she senses an opening. Articulate and liked by all, she joins a sturdy but beleaguered band of females who take on their town—and the menfolk—to lead a local campaign for the vote, an issue that will be put before only male voters, of course. The film has a touch of a modern-day “Lysistrata,” with the lady activists even separating themselves into a makeshift dormitory away from their families and without the distraction of husbands.

The film, written and directed by Petra Volpe, benefits greatly from a fine lead performance by Marie Leuenberger, brilliantly playing an unassertive person who blossoms into a convinced advocate. She not only discovers her own activist skills but also awakens to her sexual self and “personhood,” aided by a bouncy feminist lecturer from outside (it is to be noted that this is an understated, subtle comedy, but some sexual elements are rather blunt and definitely “R”). A redemptive ending challenges “The Divine Order,” at least in this one Swiss town.

(The film runs 96 minutes, is unrated, and is in Swiss-German with English subtitles.)

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