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REVIEW

“He’ll Forgive You. He Forgives Everyone.”

Dominik Mencej’s *Riders* (*Jezdeca*, 2022)

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R*iders* is a raw perspective on the buddy road trip genre, where a couple of restless small-time bikers flee the confines of their boring rural hometown. Inspired by a bootleg VHS copy of *Easy Rider*, Tomaž and Anton modify their rickety scooters into motorbike-like machines and hit the road. In the wild, their freedom doesn’t come cheap, and they will need all their wits, common sense, and one another’s support to survive the journey. Set in Slovenia during the Spring of 1999, *Riders* is a nostalgic experience, but one that focuses on Tomaž and Anton’s capacity for brotherhood and friendship, particularly how these can change when we outgrow ourselves and the people we lose along the way.

The two main protagonists are an uneven pairing. Tomaž (Timon Šturbej) is a dutiful son to his mother. He does his daily chores, cleaning the church steps and maintaining the graveyard headstones. He helps around the house, fixing parts in the shed, and keeps his mother company in the absence of a father. Tomaž’s simple routine may not be the most enthralling, but it is in this comfortable milieu where he has so quickly settled. Anton (Petja Labović), on the other hand, is rebellious and reckless in comparison. A thief and a liar, Anton is brimming with teenage angst and insecurity. For every one of Tomaž’s acts of kindness and sensitivity, Anton will react with malice and misplaced aggression. It is even Anton’s irrational and impulsive deed that leads the two young men on their quest when he is fired from his job at the post office for opening mail and stealing petty cash he finds inside. Yet, they both have a need for the other counterpart. If it wasn’t for Anton’s brash autonomy, Tomaž would have never had the courage to leave the village; without Tomaž’s sense of forgiveness and responsibility, Anton would most likely be alone forever.

Riders is filled with religious imagery. The presence of the church can be seen not just in the buildings and statues littered throughout the countryside, but also in other characters and even in nature itself. When Tomaž and Anton

break down by the side of the road at the beginning of their travels, Anton is seen prodding a dead frog with a stick. In the scene prior, the camera lingers on an abundance of frogs sitting on a log by the lake, alluding to Moses and the plagues of Egypt from the book of Exodus. The mysterious stranger who later accompanies them is named Peter, another possible allusion to the Bible and a forewarning of his premature death later on. The majority of crucial narrative instances are preceded by shots of the wind whipping through the grass and trees, or by the sounds of thunderous rumblings in the sky, as if what is happening on-screen has been predetermined by an omnipresent, higher power. It could be the case that the filmmaker is suggesting that we cannot run from everything altogether and that there are pieces of home we take with us whether we like it or not. Notably, *Riders* opens with a premonition. A great storm fills the ground with running water. The puddles overflow with the power of falling raindrops pelting the earth. On his hands and knees, Tomaž weeps, covered in dirt. Above him, high upon the moonlit hill, an angelical silhouette appears surrounded by bright, shining beams of light. Before he can make out the ghostly figure, the startled Tomaž awakens from his dream. This sequence is repeated throughout the film, amplifying its biblical connotations and religious significance. Interestingly, the dream is never fully explained and Tomaž still seems to drift further away from his Catholic upbringing. He becomes a true manifestation of a doubting Thomas if you will.

Tomaž and Anton’s partnership is quickly tested by the introduction of Ana (Anja Novak), a young runaway nun from their village. She poses a threat to their dynamic the moment she prefers Tomaž to Anton. As with Anton’s unrequited love for his ex-girlfriend Tina that led to a bar brawl, his rejection by Ana further pushes him into the side-lines of Tomaž’s life. The audience understands Tomaž’s realization that he doesn’t share a future friendship with Anton and – even though he is his only friend – they probably never had a strong relationship in the first place. By the end of the film, Tomaž is on the cusp of maturity; he questions his place in society, the validity of religion and whether he can trust his newfound romantic proclivity. Anton, however, is just determined to be a drifter and move as far away from his home as he can. After the tragic death of his friend Peter during a biking accident, Anton says his farewell to Tomaž and Ana, riding off into the sunset. Although his fate is not sealed, his brotherhood with Tomaž has been shaken to its core and they are likely to never see one another again. *Riders* suggests that we not only need to escape from our humdrum routines and locales, but we also need to find an independence from ourselves to feel a real sense of freedom.