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REVIEW

“The Only Loser Here Is You.”

Irma Pužauskaitė’s *The 9th Step* (*9-tas Zingsnis*, 2022)

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The 9th Step is a touching portrayal of seventeen-year-old Ieva and her ex-alcoholic father’s attempt at rebuilding their tenuous relationship. Inspired by the director’s own struggle with addiction, the film explores the impact of living with the disease and its repercussions on our connection with others. The shared narrative between Ieva and her father Linas is an optimistic observation in an otherwise discouraging circumstance. *The 9th Step* shows us how – against the odds – we can overcome our own demons to help not only ourselves but also the ones we hold dearest to our hearts.

Ieva (Gerda Čiuraitė) is a gifted student, but she is distracted by her recalcitrant best friend Maja (Angelina Daukaitė). Her aunt is traveling in the UK, her mother lives in Norway with a new partner, and her father Linas hasn’t contacted her in over two years. Alone, and with the destructive influence of Maja, Ieva is caught by the police for being drunk and disorderly. Linas is awakened by the call in the early hours of the morning to come and pick Ieva up from the apartment she’s been left in. When he tells his girlfriend in bed he must collect his daughter, she is shocked that it’s the first time he’s mentioned having a family. At the custodial hearing, Ieva is given the choice whether to move out of her native homeland of Lithuania with her caring mother or stay in the country but with her estranged father. In the heat of the moment, arguing with his ex-wife, Linas admits to wanting an abortion in front of Ieva. Begrudgingly, she moves in with her father in order to be near her school and friends. The challenges of fatherhood not only put an extra strain on his already problematic relationship with Ieva but may lead to a relapse in recovery as well.

It is not only alcohol that Linas (Valentin Novopolskij) must circumvent, but also Maja’s sexual advances. She is a master of manipulation, objectifying him with her gaze, overbearing attentiveness and coy physical touches. She lies about her unwell mother in order to engage with Linas emotionally and in the hope it will gain them further intimacy as he comforts her. Crying on his shoulder,

Linas' conflicting thoughts are exposed by his wild eyes, unsure where to look and unsettled. For him, Maja embodies risk, temptation, and satisfaction – everything that he longs for since his one year of sobriety. At the bowling alley, Maja flirts with a neighboring team of teenage boys to make Linas jealous. Weakened by her seductive energy and his own misplaced desire, he spends the evening stuck to her side, more affectionate and demonstrative than ever. That night at a sleepover with Ieva, Maja sneaks into Linas' bedroom. The room burns with a bright orange shade as the sunrise seeps through the curtains. They share a cigarette and start to undress. As they kiss passionately, Linas breaks away and flees the scene, leaving Maja naked, humiliated and hurt.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, the ninth of the twelve steps to recovery is "to make amends to those they harmed". This philosophy can be applied universally in the film. Linas must make up lost time with his daughter, for stealing money from her and for hiding her from his partners. Ieva also has some redemption to do. She needs to atone for her wrongdoings; binge drinking, breaking into a furniture store, running away from home. She builds a wall between herself and her father when he tries to absolve himself. She tells him how disgusted she is by him even though Linas is working hard to create a trustful bond. This is however complicated further by Maja's false admission that Linas sexually assaulted her. When Ieva bunks off school and ignores the social worker's phone calls, Linas believes he's lost her for good. Despite his efforts to find her safe and sound, when they reunite, she is still withdrawn and cruel. It is only when they say goodbye at the train station when we see Ieva's fickle temperament and stern demeanor fade away. After passing through the platform gates, she hesitates for a short moment and runs back to her father in the queue. She pauses, unassured and afraid of rejection, in front of him. The small distance left between them now seems one hundred miles long. Simultaneously they leap into each other's arms in a tight, lovingly warm embrace, as if shrugging off the traumas of the past they once shared. It is a moving display of quiet acceptance and forgiveness, providing an uplifting yet restrained feeling of closure for the audience.

The 9th Step details the endeavors people touched by addiction must face and the adversity they must deal with as a result of it. The answer isn't to ignore it, but dwelling on the past too much can be just as fruitless. The trick is to keep going. After her talented recital playing the French horn, Ieva is accepted onto the course and encouraged to fly the nest to further her studies at music school. Linas will continue to work on the ferry and meet with his sponsor at AA meetings, avoiding his insatiable cravings. When we try to rebuild our lives, there will always be an odd piece missing. Only by looking at the bigger picture can we move on, just like the recovery program: one day at a time.