My Little Sister: Two siblings clinging together

Bernd Reinhardt
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Written and directed by Stéphanie Chuat and Véronique Reymond

In recent decades, a small minority of the middle class have successfully pursued their careers and become wealthy while a large majority live under increasingly insecure conditions and directly confront poverty. This polarisation also applies to the art and film world.

Can love between siblings survive when a brother falls ill and needs care, while his sister enjoys life as one of society's affluent? This is the question posed by the Swiss film *My Little Sister* (Stéphanie Chuat and Véronique Reymond), now available from Film Movement. The work is Switzerland's selection in the best international feature film category at the 2021 Academy Awards.

Sven (Lars Eidinger) is an actor at Berlin's famed Schaubühne Theatre. His performance as Hamlet is widely praised. Sven, however, is diagnosed with a terminal illness and doesn't have long to live. At first full of hope, he prepares for the resumption of his successful portrayal of Hamlet. His sister Lisa (Nina Hoss) helps him as much as she can and temporarily brings him to Switzerland, where her husband Martin (Jens Albinus) is the director of an elite school. A return to Berlin is planned.

When Martin receives the news that his employers want to extend his contract, he agrees without consulting Lisa. He had no choice, he declares later. The same applies to director David (played by the real director of the Berlin Schaubühne, Thomas Ostermeier). He had to drop *Hamlet*. His primary obligation is to fill his theatre, and Sven is too weak. David also turns down a dialogue piece written for Sven by Lisa: a modern version of the fairy tale, *Hansel and Gretel*.

The apparent lack of alternatives turns out in every case to be socially shaped: David, agonising over his own role, ultimately distances himself from his lacklustre world and its existential problems, which now include Sven. *My Little Sister* hits the right note in its portrayal of careerists, for example, in one scene where elite parents sip champagne with headmaster Martin and then enquire in a thoroughly stilted fashion as to whether he has already enrolled his own children at the school.

Lisa and Martin's two children have long been close to their sick uncle. When Lisa returns to Berlin with the pair, Martin tries to kidnap the kids and take them back to Switzerland (an act he calls "the best for their future"). Martin fails mainly due to the resistance of the children, in particular the slightly older daughter. The children in the film are part of a new generation beginning to rebel against the social inequality and coldness endemic to capitalist society. It is quite fitting that the future according to Martin takes the form of a luxury health resort in Switzerland in the midst of a snowy, cold winter.

Certain circles of artists are examined with irony. Lisa's mother Kathy (Marthe Keller), a slightly demented former actress, opposes Lisa's fairy-tale text and is only prepared to accept pedagogic "political theatre" à la (supposedly) Bertolt Brecht. Everything else is "petty bourgeois." Her way of life is typical of former radicals of the 1960s, who criticise social contradictions in general, but at the same time ferociously hang on to their self-centred, wealthy lifestyles.

Martin also occasionally makes ironic comments about the rich parents of the pupils attending his elite school. It is the situation confronting Sven that forces him to show his real colours. Suddenly, a gulf emerges between him and Lisa that neither would have thought possible under "normal" circumstances.

Lisa's social attitude is influenced by her approach to art, without her being aware of it at first. She longs for

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something genuinely substantial. Her determination to make the best of her brother's remaining time restores her lost creativity: *Hansel and Gretel*—two siblings clinging together in a dark fairy-tale forest in an emotionally frozen setting. Together they fight the enticing temptations of the evil, capitalist "witch" and eventually defeat her.

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