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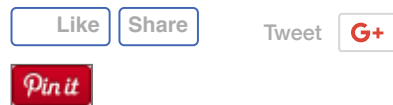


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THE NINTH DAY

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By *Erica Abeel* (<http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/term/93>) May 11, 2005



Reviews

"Do the right thing" is a phrase much bandied about, but rarely has it seemed as hard to embrace as in *The Ninth Day* from Volker Schlöndorff (*The Tin Drum*, *The Legend of Rita*). Set in 1942 in Nazi-occupied Europe—a period when dissenting Catholic priests were sent to Dachau—this riveting but grim film places Father Henri Kremer (Ulrich Matthes) in a hellish predicament: Either he condones the Nazi regime in writing, in exchange for his freedom and those of his fellow clerics in the "priest block," or he refuses to collaborate, suffering the consequences for himself and his family. Talk about capital C conflict.

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Veteran filmmaker Schlöndorff fleshes out the ordeal of Father Kremer through a face-off between him and Untersturmführer Gebhardt (August Diehl), a lapsed seminarian and zealous, smooth-skinned young Nazi. The plot is set in motion after Kremer is given a sudden, unexplained furlough from Dachau's "priest block." He rapidly learns that Gebhardt has enlisted him to perform a service to the party—and given him nine days to do so. He must persuade the staunchly anti-Nazi Bishop of Luxembourg to capitulate to the Germans and drive a wedge between that country and the Vatican. The most gripping scenes record the verbal theological jousting between Kremer—a man of conscience, but demoralized and fearful for his family—and Gebhardt, who comes on like a handsome, baby-faced Satan, presenting an ingenious brief for Judas.

Based on the true account of a Catholic theologian from Luxembourg, the film is shot less like a documentary than an angular, stylized German Expressionist view from one man's perspective. (With a few exceptions, mercifully, the Dachau scenes are not graphic.) Kremer's family is hastily sketched, the better to maintain focus on the main drama. A mostly monochrome palette of greys

and whites conveys the rigors of a European winter, and also a kind of winter of the soul, as the good priest dukes it out with temptation. As Gebhardt, Diehl is no stereotypical SS brute; he's all the more dangerous for being seductive and golden-tongued. Matthes, as a lone hero who keeps us guessing till the "ninth day," portrays his character with irony and minimal pathos. Like *Amen* from Costa-Gavras, this powerful film celebrates individual acts of conscience in barbarous times.

-Erica Abeel

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