

'Narcosis': Thessaloniki Review

Dir: Martijn de Jong. Netherlands. 2022. 111mins

This assured debut may dive headlong into a family's grief but its story strikes a careful balance, gently floating along with the theme rather than wallowing in it. Dutch director Martijn De Jong has previously had success with short films, including 2013's *Stand-by Me*, which was the Dutch nominee for the Academy Awards. With *Narcosis*, he steps up to features with an ease and ambition evidenced by the film's selection as this year's Dutch International Oscar submission.



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Narcosis premiered at the Netherlands Film Festival, where it won three Golden Calf awards, and released in its homeland on October 20. The presence of Dutch A-listers Thekla Reuten and Fedja van Huet paired with its universal themes and some supernatural touches should see it attract distribution interest elsewhere.

Reuten and Huet play Merel and John, a couple who live an apparently idyllic but unconventional life in an elderly, tree-lined villa with their pre-teen son Boris (Sepp Ritsema) and his younger sister Ronja (Lola van Zoggel). John is a diver while Merel is a clairvoyant of sorts, attempting to channel the feelings of the dead in a bid to help their loved ones come to terms with loss.

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De Jong, writing with Laura Van Dijk, is economical in his set-up, introducing this world before we learn that John has failed to resurface from a risky expedition in South Africa. With the loss, the whole film takes a breath in – the widescreen constricts to a square, adding a spacial pressure to the family as we return to them a year later.

Merel and her children struggle to cope with the finality of death in different ways. For Merel, it brings concrete financial problems while the emotional prospect of using her psychic gift to reach out to John fills her with dread. Boris, meanwhile, becomes withdrawn, focusing in his spare time on holding his breath under water for as long as he can. As for little Ronja, she just carries on, holding imaginary conversations with dad each night from an old phone booth in the garden.

Rather than present a straightforward narrative, De Jong dips in and out of the various family member's lives as they all grapple with grief. He also allows the past to play hide and seek with the present, so that we are fully immersed in each character's emotions both in the moment and as recollections bubble up and intrude. De Jong is also a keen observer. He conveys just how much Ronja misses her dad in a simple gesture that sees her reach out to touch the hair of her friend's father. Elsewhere, he brings home the weight of Boris's sense of horror at John's watery grave in the way the youngster inspects his own wrinkled hand in the bath.

The supernatural is also held out as a possibility, rather than a fact. While it's clearly something Merel believes in, just as surely as Ronja believes in those phone calls, it is handled subtly so that its ambiguity remains. Reuten brings an intensity to Merel that not only embodies her character's

own sorrow but reflects her feelings about the grief she's absorbing from her kids. Ritsema matches her with the bruised determination he brings to Boris, while van Zoggel has a freewheeling naturalism

The fourth key performer in the film is light, which skips through the movie. Martijn van Broekhuizen captures it in all its forms, from the brightness of the "white room" where Merel holds her psychic sessions, to the way it catches the water into which Boris dives and how it dapples through the trees near the house. As the characters finally come up for air and the aspect ratio breathes again, hopefulness shines through.

Production companies: Oak Motion Pictures

International sales: Coccinelle Film info@coccinellefilm.com Producer: Trent

Screenplay: Laura Van Dijk, Martijn de Jong Cinematography: Martijn van Broekhuizen

Production design: Romke Faber

Editing: Lot Rossmark

Music: Jorrit Kleijnen, Jacob Meijer

Main cast: Thekla Reuten, Fedja van Huet, Sepp Ritsema, Lola van Zoggel, Vincent van der Valk